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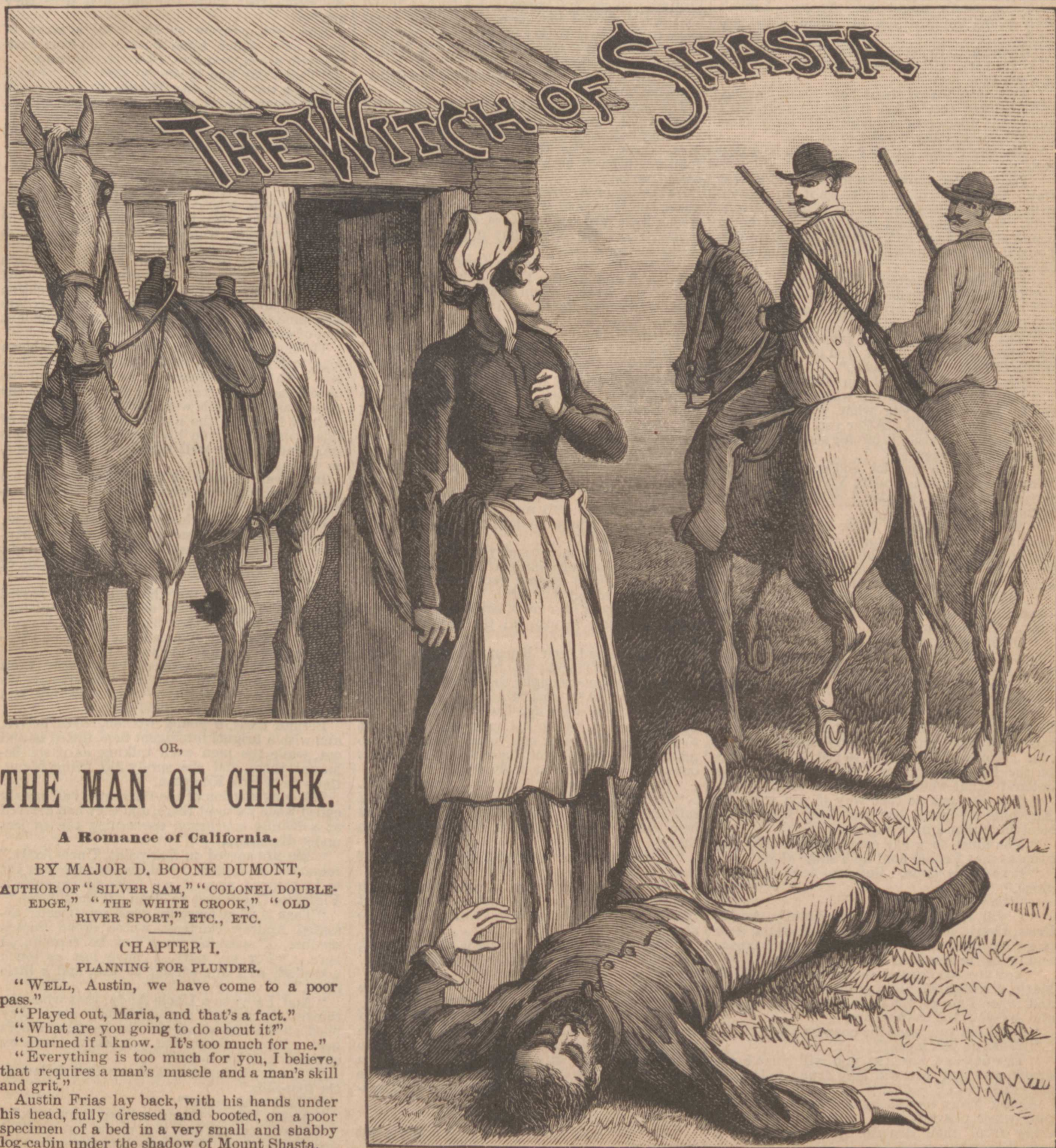
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OR, THE MAN OF CHEEK.

A Romance of California.

BY MAJOR D. BOONE DUMONT,
AUTHOR OF "SILVER SAM," "COLONEL DOUBLE-
EDGE," "THE WHITE CROOK," "OLD
RIVER SPORT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

PLANNING FOR PLUNDER.

"WELL, Austin, we have come to a poor pass."

"Played out, Maria, and that's a fact."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Durned if I know. It's too much for me."

"Everything is too much for you, I believe, that requires a man's muscle and a man's skill and grit."

Austin Frias lay back, with his hands under his head, fully dressed and booted, on a poor specimen of a bed in a very small and shabby log-cabin under the shadow of Mount Shasta.

He was a tall and dark man, of mixed Texan and Mexican blood, a strange combination of

"I WANT NOTHING," SHE PROUDLY REPLIED. "I WILL BURY MY DEAD,
AND I ASK NO FAVORS."

impetuosity and languor, of ambition and worthlessness.

His wife, Maria Frias, was a handsome, dark-eyed woman from Louisiana, full of the fire and passion of a southern clime, which had been subdued, but not quenched, by her experience of life with Austin Frias.

Their clothing was very shabby, extreme poverty being shown by the fact that the husband's boots—one of the most useful possessions of a mountain man—were shockingly dilapidated, and the cabin exhibited a sad dearth of the necessities of life.

Some miners' tools in a corner were badly rusted, and the whisky jug on the table was empty, which was surely a mark of dire poverty.

The cabin, even, did not belong to Austin Frias—that is to say, he had not built it, and had scarcely done a stroke of work toward improving it, but had found it deserted there, and had simply taken possession.

Outside, under a poor pretense of shelter, a half-starved horse was hitched, and that, with a rifle and a revolver, was about all the property of any value that was left to the Frias family.

Considering this distressing condition of affairs, it was no wonder that the wife of Austin Frias wanted to know what he was going to do about it, or that she was not sparing of her blame in speaking of what he had left undone.

"I don't see that any man's muscle or skill or grit are of any use in this country," sulkily answered Austin Frias.

"Some men's might be. As you haven't tried yours, the less you say about it the better."

"Haven't I, though? Haven't I prospected all about here, without striking the faintest sign of a streak of luck?"

"You have loafed about here for some time, and I believe you called it prospecting; but I know that there was precious little work done when there was any whisky to be had."

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy."

"I have never known you to be dulled in that way. Well, Austin, I don't want to quarrel with you, and there's no use in crying over spilt milk. The solemn fact is that we have not a pound of provisions left, except a little flour, and I would like to know what you are going to do about it."

"I can shoot something, I reckon."

"There is not a drop of whisky left, either."

"I will ride over to the Glen and get the jug filled."

"Yes, I suppose you can get credit for whisky when nobody will let you have a dollar's worth of food. That's queer."

"It's a fact, though. I can get the whisky."

"But we can't live on whisky—at least, I can't. I will tell you what you might do, Austin, if you would. After you get the whisky, suppose you swap it off for some bacon and a little tea and sugar?"

"And a house and lot and some furniture. What are you talking about? You ought to know it can't be done. Besides, I would have to go without the whisky."

"You don't seem to think of what I would have to go without. I must say, Austin, that you ought to be tired of this starvation business, and that you might summon up ambition enough to do something worth while."

"What is worth while?" angrily demanded the man, as he sat up and lowered his feet to the floor. "What can I do?"

"Other men find something to do. There are chances that other men take. Sometimes a man holds up a stage, and it seems to me that a poor devil that has got as low down as you have got is none too good for that."

"I wish I was good enough. That has got to be a deuced risky business in these parts, Maria, and there is precious little to be picked up at it, too. Would you want me to risk twenty years in the Penitentiary for the chance of twenty dollars? That would be a dollar a year."

"You can put it that way if you want to. Anything to crawl out and keep from doing something that a man might do."

"You must be going crazy, Maria. Do you suppose that I could hold up a stage alone?"

"It has been done. But you need not do it alone."

"Who will help me?"

"I will, and I now tell you plainly, Austin Frias, that if you don't do something right soon to get us out of this scrape, I will make a break, and it will be a sudden one."

"You are too durned sudden as it is. Well, Maria, I'll take the jug and go and get it filled, and when I am at the Glen I will look around and see what the chances are."

"I can tell you what the chances are."

"What do you mean?"

"The chances are that you will come home drunk, and that you will stay drunk as long as the liquor lasts."

Austin Frias was about to make a savage reply, when the attention of both was drawn away from their dispute by the sound of a horse's footsteps outside.

It was so seldom that a traveler or visitor

approached the lonely cabin, that the couple were eagerly anxious to learn who was the intruder upon their solitude.

It might be some stranger with money upon his person, and, if so, a bold move on their part might put them in possession of his wealth."

Such, at least, was the thought that rushed into the mind of Mrs. Frias as she hurriedly threw open the door and looked out.

What she saw there did not give her an immediate prospect of wealth; but there is no judging by appearances.

The stranger, who had reined up a fair-looking horse in front of the cabin, seemed to be a man of middle-age—at least, he could not be called young—and his attire was nearly as shabby as that of Austin Frias himself. If he was a capitalist, he did not look the character.

He dismounted, hitched his horse, and with a propitiatory smile approached Mrs. Frias, who invited him to walk in.

"Hope I don't intrude," he mildly observed as he entered the cabin. "I should be sorry to trouble you, my friends; but I am a poor man, and would like to get something to eat, which I am able to pay for in a small way."

"Walk right in and take a seat, old man," was the cheerful greeting of Austin Frias. "You are welcome to everything we've got, but I am sorry to say that you will find precious little to eat here, as we are cleaned out to-day."

"That is bad for you, as well as for me," replied the stranger, as he came to anchor in a chair.

"It is bad, for a fact. I had been off prospecting, you see, and when I got back I found that the cupboard was bare. I was just about to go to the Glen to lay in supplies when you came along. We haven't even got a drop of whisky in the house."

"I can help you out there, and we can drink, if we can't eat."

The stranger produced a large and well-filled flask, which Austin Frias seized upon eagerly, and they both sought consolation in its contents, Mrs. Frias joining them with more alacrity than might have been expected from her previous remarks.

As the liquor warmed her heart toward the guest, she remembered that she had some flour with a little lard and molasses, and hastened to prepare some flapjacks that might serve as a substitute for a meal.

"You are what I call a Good Samaritan, stranger," said Austin Frias, as he helped himself to the whisky again, "and I want to become better acquainted with you. My name is Austin Frias, and this is my wife. What is your handle, now?"

"Heston is my name—Tom Heston—and I have come up from Sacramento way—a sort of wandering character just now."

"All right. I wish I was one of the same sort. I am not an inquisitive person, Mr. Heston; but, it is so seldom we strike a stranger in this out-of-the-way place, that I wondered what had brought you up here."

"I am looking after a little business in this part of the country, and I came to the conclusion that I would have to take in a partner if I could find one to suit me. Being a stranger, I did not know where to look for the kind of a man I wanted."

"I wish that I might suit you, Mr. Heston, if there is a chance of money in the business; but it is a serious and solemn fact that I have not got a dollar to put into it."

"I am as poor as a crow, myself; but for this business I can furnish all the capital that is needed."

Mrs. Frias had been listening intently to this conversation while she was frying her flapjacks, and she doubtless thought that a word from her just then would be seasonable and appropriate.

"Just a little while ago I was telling my husband," she said, "that his luck had turned out so badly that he could not be any worse off, no matter what he did, and I advised him to start out and try his hand at holding up a stage."

"He might do worse," observed Tom Heston.

"He couldn't do much better in these parts. I told him, too, that I was willing to turn in and help him. Yes, Mr. Heston, we have come to that."

"What did your husband seem to think of that scheme?"

"He doubted whether there was enough money in it to pay for the risk, and he thought that he would not be able to work the scheme alone."

"That is just what I thought about myself, and that is why I was looking for a partner."

"What! You don't mean—"

"I mean to say, Mrs. Frias, that the scheme you proposed to your husband is the very business that I have come up here to attend to, and that's as square as a die. As for the money in it, there is a big pile in the strike I want to make, and it is a sure thing. The information that I have is the capital I want to put into the business. I perceive, Mrs. Frias, that your husband has some capital, too."

"He? What capital is that?"

"He has a good rifle, and I have nothing but a revolver."

"Well, that's something. Here's your cakes,

Mr. Heston. Start right in and eat them—you and Austin—while I make some more. I wish I had something nice for you, but this is better than nothing."

It was just a little better than nothing, and the meal was soon dispatched, and then the two men began to talk business in earnest, Austin Frias developing a lively interest in the plan under the influence of the stranger's whisky.

Tom Heston was somewhat affected, too, and became excited as he explained his plan.

"The place that you call the Glen," he said—"I suppose that is a town or camp named Glengartney."

"That's it," answered Frias. "An old Scotchman who settled there gave it that name."

"It is the terminus of a stage route, as I understand, and by the stage, which ought to reach Glengartney about daybreak in the morning, a rich man is to travel to-night. He is not only rich, but carries a good part of his wealth about him. He may not have much money in his pockets; but he carries some very valuable papers."

"What sort of papers?" inquired Frias.

"What do you say to Comstock stock—Consolidated Virginia?"

"Tain't worth much. It was 'way down two weeks ago."

"Two weeks is an age with that sort of thing. It is well worth having now, and soon it will be 'way up—mind what I tell you. I am so sure of this, Mr. Frias, that I even have the numbers of the certificates that we will find on him when we strike that stage to-night, and here they are."

Tom Heston threw on the table a scrap of paper upon which some figures had been written with a pen, and Mrs. Frias picked it up.

"That looks like business," said she, "and I will keep this paper, Mr. Heston, so as to check off the securities for you when you come back here."

"All right, my lady. They shall be brought to you, and we will divvy up right here."

CHAPTER II.

GETTING THE PLUNDER.

THERE was a good, solid, substantial house, well up in the hills, the approach to which was by a pass that was sometimes choked up in winter, leaving the residents snow-bound.

Two seasons, however, had accustomed them to that, and they did not mind it since they knew what they had to expect, and the situation was high and healthy up there among the cedars and pines, and the arable land was abundant and of amazing richness.

The house was originally built of heavy hewn logs, well laid together; but these had been covered with weather-boarding, so that it had the appearance of a frame building, while, at the same time, the walls were stout and thick.

Crow Nest was the name which the owner of this house had given his place, and he and his small family were well satisfied with the name, as well as the location.

In a pleasant room at Crow Nest were seated three men, each of whom was, in his appearance, quite unlike the others.

One was the proprietor of the establishment, Eric Kempton by name, a young man of thirty-five, tall, stalwart and handsome, with light hair and blue eyes and the clear complexion of a Swede.

Another was a man who had surely passed fifty, whose face, as well as his speech, plainly showed his Scotch extraction. This was Andrew Gartney, who had founded the town of Glengartney and given it its name.

The third was considerably younger than Eric Kempton, with black hair and eyes and an unmistakable Spanish type of countenance, and he was known as Manuel del Castro.

Besides these, a young woman, small, active, and with a bright, intelligent face, flitted in and out, while the men were talking, as if she belonged there, and she surely did, being Maud, the wife of Eric Kempton.

The conversation of the three men had nearly ended when we meet them, and they had arrived at a definite conclusion concerning the subject under discussion.

"We are agreed on that point, Uncle Andy," remarked Kempton. "Horse-stealing has got to be stopped, even if we have to organize a Vigilance Committee to clean out the thieves."

"That is what must be done, my friend," assented Andrew Gartney, whose broad Scotch manner of speaking need not be reproduced here. "For my part, I have lost as much horseflesh as I am willing to lose, and a little more."

"And I may say, Uncle Andy, that when the thieves carried off my wife's bay mare, they piled on the last straw that broke this camel's back. So you think that you know where we ought to look for them?"

"I think we ought to look up that fellow in the foot-hills."

"What is his name?"

"Austin Frias. I supposed you knew him."

"I have met the man you mean, but was not sure of his name. However, it is the nature of the beast that we have to look into, rather than

the name, and that, as I understand it, is not highly attractive. Austin Frias seems to be a worthless, drunken sort of a scamp, and I should say that he hardly has grit enough to go into the horse-stealing business."

"Of course he is not alone in this, Kempton, and a man of his stripe is easily persuaded, especially when poverty pinches. We must look him up, anyhow, and worry him a little on suspicion. The only question is whether we are strong enough for the task."

"Strong enough to tackle that man? We ought to be."

"He has accomplices, as I told you, and we may find them with him."

"We are three able-bodied men, counting my friend Del Castro, who has said that he will go with us, and I know that he is as good with the rifle or the revolver as the best of us."

"That ought to be enough. We will cross the stage road, then, and I can find the way to that fellow's shanty easy enough. But we ought to be off."

"Take care of yourself, Eric," said Mrs. Kempton, who was just then present and listening.

"I always do," answered her husband, "but I go along and attend to business all the same."

In a little while the three men were mounted, each of them well armed, and they rode away for Crow Nest.

"I hope we will find that fellow at home," said Kempton, as he led the way through the pass.

They were not likely to "find that fellow at home," as Austin Frias was giving his attention to what appeared to him to be the best piece of business he had struck in a long time.

He had left the cabin in the foot-hills with his new friend, both mounted, one carrying a rifle and a revolver, and the other a revolver only, followed by the best wishes of Maria Frias for their success in this stroke of business.

"Of course you know the stage road, Mr. Frias," Tom Heston had said as they rode down the trail that led from the cabin.

"Indeed I do. I know all the ins and outs of this part of the country, and precious little good the knowledge has done me so far. I can put you in the place where we will have the best possible chance to hold up the stage. There is no trouble about that. I only hope that there will be money enough to pay us for the risk."

"You may trust me for the money part of it! All we have to do is to strike that stage, and our fortunes are made."

Midnight found them at the stage road, just at the point which Austin Frias had fixed upon as the best for the business they had in hand.

The road lacked much of being a turnpike, and at this point it was so rough and so badly gullied that the horses which drew the stage would be compelled to move very slowly.

Rocks and trees afforded sufficient cover, and Tom Heston expressed himself as being well pleased with the location from a business point of view.

"We must hide our horses where they will be handy," said he, "and wait here patiently until the stage comes along. Then what we have to do will be simple and easy. When the concern has stopped, you must hold your rifle on the driver, while I step forward and worry the passengers."

"There is just one thing in the way," observed Frias. "Lightning Charley Kline travels on that stage sometimes as a guard, and he is said to be most unmercifully quick on the shoot."

"I have heard of him, and that is one of the points I have looked after. The lightning gentleman is laid up with inflammatory rheumatism, and the chances are that he won't get out of doors for a week."

"That is good news for us, partner. If he is out of the way, the job ought to be an easy one!"

"Easy as lying. All you will have to do, as I told you, is to hold your rifle on the driver. You don't need to take notice of what I am doing, or to bother about me in any way. I can take care of myself. Keep the driver covered, and don't let him so much as wink."

Austin Frias promised to follow these instructions implicitly, and the pair soon completed their arrangements.

Having placed their horses in concealment, so that at the same time they could be easily reached in case of a pinch, they snuggled down in their ambush, and waited for the expected stage.

It was very late on its route that night, and they had more than three hours to wait before they heard the crunching of the wheels of the lumbering conveyance, and then the panting and snorting of the horses as they toiled up the rugged road.

Just before it reached their ambush, they stepped out into the road, and Tom Heston's sharp and startling order brought the concern to a halt.

The tired horses were willing enough to stop, and the driver, who was alone on the box, was not disposed to deny the inducement offered by a leveled rifle.

As soon as he had ordered the halt, Heston

advanced quickly to the stage, and politely but firmly requested the passengers to step out.

There were but two of them, and both were dozing in opposite corners of the machine when their journey was rudely interrupted.

One was a middle-aged man, who so closely resembled Tom Heston that they might easily have been mistaken for each other, and he was well wrapped up as a protection from the cool night air.

The other was a young man, not very bright or very brave—in fact, quite an ordinary kind of young man—new to the country, who was on his way to Glengartney to act as clerk in a general store there.

The elderly man started from his doze as soon as the order to halt was given, and the stage came to a stop.

Quickly awaking to an idea of what had happened, he felt in his clothes, as if to find a weapon; but the wrappings with which he was incumbered were in the way of his search.

He glanced sharply at his companion, but caught no suggestion of aid from that quarter, as the young man seemed to be stupefied.

Then the door of the stage was opened, and the order to step out followed, and there was nothing to do but submit.

The elderly man got out, and the young man followed him, and both, obeying another sharp command, ranged themselves in front of the man who had invited them out.

As the former caught a glimpse of the robber, he started and stared, and his action was imitated by the man who had invited him out, while the young man stood and stared stupidly at both of them.

They were so nearly alike that it was no wonder that there was a general stare.

Tom Heston was the first to recover his self-possession, if he could be said to have lost it, and he at once proceeded to attend to business.

"I want nothing from you," he said to the young man; "but you must both throw up your hands and mind what I tell you."

There was no help for it, and they held up their hands.

Austin Frias kept his rifle leveled at the driver, who sat motionless in his place.

Tom Heston advanced upon the elderly man, holding his cocked revolver in his right hand, opened the traveler's inner coat by a quick movement, and dived his left hand into an inside pocket.

This action seemed to touch a spring that instantly started the traveler's machinery into motion.

"You sneaking scoundrel!" he muttered between his clinched teeth, as he suddenly lowered his two hands and grabbed his aggressor.

The robber must have anticipated such an attempt, as he stepped back sharply, partially eluding the grasp, and handled his revolver viciously.

He did not handle it for the purpose of shooting, however, but merely changed his grip from the butt to the barrel, uncocking it quickly, and using it as a blunt weapon.

This weapon he brought down with a powerful blow upon the head of the traveler, who sunk under the stroke.

Heston caught his inner coat before he had quite reached the ground, and dived into the inside pocket again, bringing out a large wallet or note-case which had been concealed there.

He opened the note-case, gave one glance at the contents, closed it, and transferred it to his own pocket.

The driver remained motionless in his place, under the cover of Austin Frias's rifle, and the young passenger from whom nothing was wanted continued to stare stupidly.

Suddenly the footsteps of horses were heard near by, and then the slow steps changed to a gallop.

Tom Heston gave a quick glance in the direction of the sound, and ran toward his partner.

"Git!" he shouted, and that word was enough.

In a few seconds the two robbers had mounted their horses and dashed away, followed by bullets from three horsemen who had appeared on the scene.

The driver also aroused himself, and sent a shot after the fugitives.

CHAPTER III.

ONE WIPED OUT.

THE three horsemen who appeared upon the scene of the stage robbery were Eric Kempton, Andrew Gartney, and Manuel del Castro.

They had left Crow Nest with the intention of striking across the Glengartney stage-road and taking the straightest route to the cabin of Austin Frias.

Riding down a trail which was well known to Kempton, they came into the road just beyond the point where the stage had been stopped, and the night was clear enough to allow them to see the obstruction and its surroundings.

"What's that down there?" demanded Kempton as they came in sight of the stage. "We have struck something that we were not looking for."

"Road-agents," answered Andrew Gartney. "Well, that is something new on this piece of road. I am glad we have struck them, and we ought to strike them hard."

"There are only two of them, and we will strike them hard. Come on, Manuel!"

The two young men put spurs to their horses, and dashed down the rough road, followed by the cautious Scot, who was behind them, not because of his cautiousness, but because his horse was slower than theirs.

As they rode they fired again and again at the robbers, who had hastened to mount and skeddaddle; but there was no visible result of their firing.

Reaching the stage, they saw one man on the ground, apparently lifeless, another bending over him, and the driver climbing down from his perch.

"A man has been killed here," said Kempton. "You stay by the stage, Uncle Andy, and Manuel and I will chase those scoundrels."

Without waiting for an answer, he turned his horse sharply to the right and galloped away into the hills, followed by Manuel del Castro.

Andrew Gartney leisurely dismounted, and as leisurely hitched his horse, before he proceeded to inquire further into the affair of the stage robbery.

By that time the driver had reached the man on the ground, and he and the remaining passenger were examining his condition.

"Was he shot, Dan?" inquired the Scotchman.

"No," answered the driver. "There wasn't a shot fired until you folks showed up."

"He was knocked down," observed the young man. "The robber hit him on the head with the butt of his pistol."

"Perhaps, then, he was only stunned, and will get over it after awhile. Did you know either of the scamps, Dan?"

"I knew one of 'em—the cuss who held a rifle on me. He stood right over thar, and kept me covered from the word go. He had a sort of a mask on his face; but I struck his style right away."

"Who was he?"

"I've noticed him about the Glen, and up thar I heerd 'em call him the Mexican."

"Austin Frias, the same man that we were going to look up. Eric Kempton thought that he didn't have grit enough to steal a horse, but it seems that there was the stuff in him for holding up a stage. Have you any idea, Dan, who the other man was?"

"I never saw him before, Mr. Gartney, and didn't get a good look at him to-night."

"You must have seen him closely, young man. What did he look like?"

"He had a piece of crape on his face," answered the remaining passenger. "Outside of that, he looked as much like this man on the ground as one man can look like another."

"Did the robbers get away with anything?"

"The man who was here took a wallet out of this man's inside pocket. That is all I saw either of them get hold of."

"Why did he strike this man?"

"Because he pitched at him and grabbed him."

"H'm-m—wanted to protect his property, I suppose. It looks as if he had something valuable in that wallet, and the other man knew where to find it. I hope our friend on the ground is not dead, though the blow he got must have been somewhat of a stunner. Dan, I think you had better keep the stage here a little while. I hope that Kempton and the other man will get back here soon."

"All right, Mr. Gartney," answered the driver, to whom the word of the Glengartney magnate was law.

Eric Kempton and Manuel del Castro were having a rather longer chase than the Scotchman fancied they would have, and this was mainly due to the difficult nature of the ground, with which they did not happen to be acquainted.

The robbers had got out of their sight before the two young men started from the stage road, and there was nothing but the sound of their flight to guide the pursuit.

Kempton was quick of hearing, and he followed the sound until he caught sight of them, and sent a shot after them, but lost them again the next moment.

When he next got a glimpse of them, there was but one in view, and the pursuer found himself in a trail that was nearly as plain as a traveled road.

He waited until his comrade came up in the mean time, looking anxiously at one side or another of the trail.

"What are you stopping here for?" demanded Del Castro, who was just behind him. "Why don't you follow them up?"

"There was but one of them ahead of me just now, and I am wondering what has become of the other."

"He has got ahead of his partner, no doubt. Come on! We are losing time."

The two young men dashed forward again at the best speed of which their horses were capa-

CHAPTER IV.

THE WIDOW'S FRIEND.

ble, and they had a good chance for rapid riding just then, as the trail was clear and open, bounded on each side by hills that horsemen could not ascend.

Day was breaking, too, and the gray light of dawn, gradually opening up the landscape, made the task of the pursuers much easier than it had been.

After a little hard riding they came in sight of the quarry again; but still there was only one of the fugitives in view.

It was not likely that the other was ahead of him, as quite a long stretch was visible, and no other horseman could be seen.

The one rider was then but a short distance ahead of his pursuers, and both he and his horse appeared to be in trouble.

It quickly became evident to those in the rear that the slackening of the horse's speed was due not so much to the weariness of the animal as to the inability of his rider to control him.

The man was clearly very weak, if not in great pain, swaying in his seat and bending forward, as he gripped the pommel of his saddle with one hand, and held the other against his left side.

Therefore the pursuers did not fire upon him again, but pressed forward to overtake him, judging that he would soon come to the end of his course.

The place where he would bring up was sufficiently apparent, as there was a log-cabin in view at the right of the trail, and a woman stood at the open door, her eyes fixed on the approaching horseman.

As the horse turned his steps from the trail toward the cabin, a sharp cry escaped from the woman's lips, and she started forward to meet him.

The man fell from his saddle, and she caught him in her arms as the pursuers came up.

Kempton and Del Castro reined up their horses, and looked down on the man and the woman.

The former was lying on the ground, motionless, or nearly so, and the latter was bending over him and partly supporting him.

After a little she let him drop from her arms, raised her head, and looked up at the two men on horseback.

It was a wild and despairing look that she gave them, but at the same time fierce and defiant. Then it softened suddenly, and an expression of perplexity came over her face.

"This is Mrs. Frias, I believe," said Eric Kempton, in a tone that was not unkindly. "Is that man your husband?"

"He was my husband," she answered hoarsely. "He is only a dead man now."

"I am sorry to inform you that he was caught robbing a stage on the Glengartney road, and that we followed him to this place."

That, then, was the end of the fine scheme into which Austin Frias had been induced by the stranger, and in which his wife had encouraged him so eagerly and hopefully!

She must have had this thought in her mind, as she again cast her eyes down upon the corpse before her; but she quickly arose and stood upright, glaring defiantly at the men on horseback.

"So you tell me," she said. "I know nothing about that. I see that he has been killed; which of you shot him?"

"I do not know who shot him," answered Kempton, and the answer was strictly true, as several shots had been fired at the fugitive, and it would be impossible to say which had hit him.

"There is no doubt that he was shot at while he was robbing the stage," continued the young man, "and he deserved to be killed if his death came in that way. He had a partner who ran away with him. We have lost sight of his partner, and are afraid that he has got away unharmed. Do you know who that man was?"

The question was not an easy one for Maria Frias to answer.

She could easily tell them the name of her husband's partner in that unlawful business; but, was it worth while that she should do so?

It was not likely that she would gain anything by the disclosure, and the man might have secured some plunder, and would be coming there to make the promised divide, not knowing of the death of Austin Frias.

She took refuge in a general denial.

"I know nothing of any such man," she answered. "I know nothing of any stage robbery, except what you have told me. I only know that my husband lies dead here."

"Do you want any help?" kindly inquired Kempton. "If there is anything we can do for you, say the word, and you will find us willing to do it."

"I want nothing," she proudly replied. "I will bury my dead, and I ask no favors."

The two young men rode away silently, Manuel del Castro turning to give a glance backward at the woman, who remained standing there in the early sunlight, her face shadowed by that look of perplexity which had been noted.

"I wish I knew what had become of that other scamp," remarked Kempton.

"Yes, he was the worst of the two, I suppose; but it is a good thing that one of them has been wiped out."

The two young men looked in vain for traces of the other road-agent as they returned to the stage road.

He had given them the slip, as well as his partner, by turning sharp off to the left, leaving the pursuers to follow the wounded man, while he wound about among the hills until daylight showed him the way southward.

When they reached the stage they found Andrew Gartney and the driver waiting impatiently for them, and their first inquiry was about the passenger who had been hurt.

"He had been knocked in the head with a pistol," answered the Scotchman, "and was badly stunned. It was a long time before he came to, and he hasn't come to his senses yet, though he is alive and likely to live."

"I am glad that those scoundrels have not committed a murder."

"What has become of them, Eric? How far did you follow them?"

"One of them we lost on the way, and we lost the other as soon as we found him."

"How was that?"

"He is dead. One of us had shot him; but he kept up until he reached his shanty, and then he dropped off and died in his wife's arms."

"That must have been Austin Frias."

"Yes, it was Austin Frias."

"So you see, Eric, that the fellow has more grit than you gave him credit for."

"He has no more grit now, and will never try to hold up a stage again."

"How did his wife take it?"

"Like a respectable variety of wildcat."

"Quite like a lady, as I thought," suggested Del Castro.

"She was brave enough, no doubt, and refused my offer of help very proudly; but she is a wildcat, for all that."

"I have heard her called the Witch of Shasta," said the Scotchman, "and it is quite likely that there is a touch of the wildcat in her nature. I would like to know who the other fellow was."

"So would I, and what has become of him, too; but he gave us the slip very neatly."

"Well, Eric, as there is nothing more for you to do here, or in the business that brought us here, you may as well ride home and ease the mind of your sweet little wife. I will go on to the Glen with the stage."

Eric Kempton, who was glad enough to go, rode away to Crow Nest with Del Castro.

The injured passenger, as Gartney had said, had come to life, but was yet unconscious.

Though there was a severe bruise on his scalp, there was nothing to show that his skull had been fractured, or that any serious injury had been sustained. His vital powers did not seem to be impaired; but his mental faculties could not be called into action by any means known to those who then had him in charge.

He muttered and murmured, incoherently, but said nothing that could give any indication of his name or condition.

He was carefully placed in the stage, and the young passenger, who gave his name as Amos Wintle, got in, with Andrew Gartney, to help take care of him, and the driver climbed to his seat and drove his team on to the Glen, the Scotchman's horse being hitched behind the vehicle.

Glengartney was a very small town, quite young, and reasonably quiet for a baby, and Andrew Gartney was the proprietor of the one hotel, the postmaster, the land agent, and, generally, the one man who was looked up to as the owner of the earth.

The wounded man was carried into a comfortable room in the hotel, where he was cared for as well as possible, and the one physician of Glengartney was immediately sent for.

He happened to be quite a remarkable person in his way, a medical man of excellent education and high ability, who had been stranded in that remote spot because of a craving for drink which occasionally overcame him.

Being on this occasion exceptionally sober, he made a good diagnosis of the case of the injured passenger, and his conclusions were such as subsequent events proved to be very accurate.

"There is no fatal injury," said Dr. Dolling, "nor anything that is likely to affect the vitality of the patient. Indeed, if it should prove to be what I suppose it to be, he is likely to live longer than if he had not received the blow. But there is no doubt that his brain has been injured. His reason is impaired, if not entirely lost, and the question is whether he will ever recover it. That is a question which can be answered only by such specialists as are found in insane asylums, and no treatment should be used except such as they advise."

"Is there nothing that we can do for him, then?" inquired Andrew Gartney.

"The best thing you can do is to find out who the man is, and where his friends are, and send word to them to come and take care of him."

This good advice was followed, with results that were reasonably satisfactory.

As the patient was unable to make any dis-

closures concerning his identity, his clothing was examined, together with the small amount of baggage he carried.

It appeared that his name was George Winck, as there were found on his person letters directed to that name from business men in San Francisco and Sacramento, which showed that he was a man of some financial consequence.

He was also well supplied with money, and possessed a valuable watch, and it seemed that he had been deprived of none of his valuables except the wallet, concerning which nothing was known beyond the fact that it had been taken by the robber who escaped.

As Mr. George Winck had clearly become an imbecile, with no knowledge of his identity or any of his belongings, Dr. Dolling's advice was followed, and information of his condition and whereabouts was sent to the business men whose names were signed to his letters.

In the course of time a lawyer from Sacramento, accompanied by a prominent physician of that city, came to the little town. They took charge of the invalid and carried him away, and that ended the episode of the stage-robbery as far as Glengartney was concerned.

The day following the robbery, however, there were other persons in the vicinity—one man, at least—who took a lively interest in the event.

After an early dinner at Crow Nest, Manuel del Castro saddled his horse, saying that he was going to take a ride, and might bring up at Glengartney.

"It is quite likely, though," he said to his friend, "that I may change my mind and pay a visit to the widow of the man who was killed last night."

"I fancied that you were a little soft-hearted about that affair," observed Kempton, "and I am willing to confess that I am touched that way myself, as I am almost sure that she is in want. If she will take anything from you, Manuel, you may hold me responsible for whatever you give her or promise her."

As Del Castro rode away, he twisted his black mustache, and smiled after a fashion of his own.

"My friend seems to be conscience-stricken," he muttered. "He thinks that he fired the shot that killed Austin Frias. Perhaps he did; but I am inclined to believe that I had the pleasure of firing that shot, and it was a good deed to rid the world of such a rat. Eric Kempton may have the credit of it, though, if he wants it, without any question on my part."

The Cuban, as Del Castro styled himself, did not attempt to go near Glengartney, but crossed the stage-road at the scene of the past night's episode, and went direct to the cabin of the late Austin Frias, the former visit having familiarized him with the route.

He arrived just in time to find the one occupant at home, as Mrs. Frias was in the act of mounting her late husband's horse and riding away.

The sight of the Cuban caused her to change her purpose, and she hitched her horse, opened the door of the cabin, and beckoned to him to follow her within.

When he had got inside, she stood and looked at him closely.

"So it is you," she said. "It really is you."

"Did you not recognize me when I was here early this morning?" he inquired.

"I thought I did, but was not sure. I was so badly worried just then that I could not be sure of anything. But I know you now. I am glad you came; but if you had happened along five minutes later, you would not have found me here."

"What were you going to do?"

"Do you suppose I could stay here, all alone, and with nothing to go on? There is not an ounce of anything to eat in the house, to say nothing of a drop to drink."

"I can remedy a part of that sad state of starvation," remarked the Cuban, as he took a flask of whisky from his pocket. "I have not forgotten your tastes, you see, and I brought this along, thinking it would please you. I want it to warm your heart and loosen your tongue."

She was quite willing to oblige him in that particular, judging by the alacrity with which she helped herself to the liquor.

"What were you going to do?" he asked again. "Of course you meant to leave this place; but what then?"

"I have been all the morning putting my dead husband under the ground. It was a nasty job and I was so weak and worried that I found it slow work. Having finished it at last, and being in a bad fix as I told you, without a bite or a dollar, I was going to take his horse to the Glen and sell it for money enough to carry me somewhere."

"You need not do that, Maria. I will let you have all the money you need for that or any other purpose. So you can keep the horse, and perhaps you had better stay here a little while longer."

"Why so?"

"Your husband had a partner in that stage-robbery business."

"Yes," she hesitated, "and that's what's the matter."

"Did Austin Frias bring anything home as his part of the plunder?"

"Not a show of color."

"He only got killed for his share in the scheme."

"I supposed that they were frightened away before they could get anything."

"The other man escaped. He got something. He took a big pocketbook from one of the passengers, and I judge, from the account I heard of the affair, that there must have been something valuable in it."

"There was," quickly responded Maria Frias.

"That is what he was after. When he was persuading Austin to go into the scheme, he said that there would be a passenger in the stage who was loaded with stock certificates, and he showed me a paper with the numbers of them on it, as he said, and I had sense enough to keep that paper, too."

"Let me see it, Maria."

She handed him the paper she spoke of, and the Cuban examined it carefully.

"This means business," said he. "These figures clearly represent the numbers of certain certificates of stock. I do not know what the stock is worth; but it must be valuable, and that man has surely got it. It is strange that he left the paper with you."

"Why, I just took it. He said that he would come back here with Austin to divide the plunder, and so I told him that I would keep the paper to check off the stuff on the divide."

"You must keep on keeping it, as it may be worth much to you. As the man was so open about the matter, he may come back here to make the divide. There is honor among thieves, I have heard."

"You ought to know more about that than I do, Manuel; but I do not expect that man to come back here."

"Well, if he has got the stuff, he may be tempted to get away with it, under the circumstances. Do you know his name?"

"Tom Heston he called himself. That may be his name, and it may not."

"I will remember it, anyhow, and you may rely upon me to help you look up that matter of business. Now, Maria, we will attend to your immediate necessities."

The Cuban gave the woman an amount of money that made her open her eyes.

"Are you a millionaire, Manuel?" she asked.

"No; but what I have is always at your service, and there is more for you, if you will follow my advice."

"What is your advice?"

"As I told you, to stay here a little while longer. That man Heston, it is just possible, may come back here. If he does, you ought to be here to meet him. If not, you will be where I can find you, and I may stay about here several days yet."

The woman's eyes flashed fiercely, and she helped herself to the whisky again.

"That will suit me," she said. "It will give me a chance to get even with the man who killed my husband."

"Were you so very fond of Austin Frias?"

"He was my husband, and revenge is sweet."

"Yes, revenge is sweet to one who really wants it. Do you know who the man was that killed your husband?"

"The man who rode up here with you this morning."

"How do you know that it was he?"

"I know it by his tone and his look when I spoke to him about it, and afterward when he asked me if I needed help. Oh, I have no doubt that he killed Austin, and I know who he is and where to find him. I think I can settle with him before I leave here."

"I won't hinder you. But there are more ways of getting revenge than one, Maria, and you had better consult with me. Perhaps I can help you."

"You? Why, you are his guest! You see that I know a thing or two. They don't call me the Witch of Shasta for nothing."

"Well, yes, I have eaten his salt, as the saying is, but I am not a bit fond of him. I only want you to be careful of yourself, as there is a future before you. By the way, where is Rosa?"

"Have you not forgotten that girl yet?"

"I am a poor forgetter, Maria, and she is one whom I could never forget. Where is she?"

"Rosa is in a convent school near Los Angeles. I suppose they are keeping her out of charity now, as it is a long time since I have sent them any money."

"We will soon put a stop to that, and we will take her out of there when we get through with what we have to do here. Now, Maria, you had better ride on to the Glen and buy what you want; but keep house here for a while, and I will see you again."

"Come soon, Manuel, as you are the first streak of light that has crossed my path in many a long day."

"I will see you soon. Adios!"

CHAPTER V.

A BURNING REVENGE.

AT Crow Nest Manuel del Castro reported the result of his mission in his own way, which varied widely from the facts.

Eric Kempton was glad to learn that Austin Frias's widow had consented to accept aid, and insisted upon repaying his guest the money he had advanced to her. Very little persuasion was required, as the amount was promptly accepted.

"I am afraid," said Kempton, "that it must have been one of my shots that killed Frias. No doubt the scamp deserved to die, but I am sorry to have been his executioner, and his widow must not suffer if I can help it."

Del Castro pocketed the money as a matter of course, and chuckled when he was alone.

"This is the worst case of conscience I have seen in a long time," was his muttered comment. "If I should be burdened by a conscience as Kempton is, it would weigh me down so that I would never be able to rise. If he knew how that matter really stands, he would discharge his conscience and send me flying."

Eric Kempton, however, not knowing what the Cuban knew, trusted his guest, and felt that he had received a favor.

He had met Del Castro nearly two years previously, in the southern part of the State, and the Cuban had come to his aid in a pinch. Being then new to the country, Kempton had greatly exaggerated this service, believing that his life had been saved by it, though it was really a matter of small risk and little value.

He had, therefore, formed a strong friendship for Del Castro, and, when he was finally and comfortably settled at Crow Nest, he had invited his friend to visit him, and use his house as a home.

In the course of time the Cuban presented himself at Crow Nest, where he was warmly welcomed, and where he seemed inclined to make a prolonged stay, living on the fat of the land, and using Kempton's property as his own, while he occupied himself with plotting harm to his host and others.

He was not himself, indeed, unless he was plotting against somebody.

"There is one good thing that has come out of the stage robbery affair," he said to Kempton. "Since that fellow Frias went under, there has been no horse-stealing in this vicinity."

"Yet it is hard for me to believe that Frias was a horse-thief," answered Eric.

"Why so? He showed that he had grit enough to hold up a stage, and that was a tougher thing than the other business."

"If he stole horses, he ought to have had something to show for it, and need not have been so dog-poor as he was."

"You know that he wasted his substance in riotous living. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. The thief is dead and the stealing is stopped."

It might have occurred to Eric Kempton, if he could have had any suspicion of his friend and guest, that it would be an easy matter for Del Castro to walk off at night with one of the horses at Crow Nest, pass it on to a confederate, and return and let himself into his room without letting his absence be known.

He might have had almost as good chances at other places in the neighborhood, as Kempton's guest was generally well received, and allowed privileges that would not have been accorded to a stranger.

Those and other performances of the kind would have been easy and handy to a man in his position.

Though horse-stealing appeared to have been stopped, other depredations began immediately after the death of Austin Frias, and they were more puzzling and annoying than anything that had yet occurred in that region.

They were nothing less than burglaries, such as are frequently committed in cities and suburban towns, and an expert in that line of business would surely have declared them to be the work of a professional.

Some of Eric Kempton's neighbors—not very near neighbors, by the way—were well-to-do people like himself, who had come from the East to seek pleasant homes on large estates, and they were the possessors of considerable property that was not only valuable but easily portable.

More than one of these suffered the loss of money, and costly articles belonging to himself or members of his family, and the stealing was so deftly and secretly done that there was not the faintest clew to the thief.

At the same time it was evident that the robberies could only have been committed by a person who was well acquainted with the houses, and the ways of their inmates.

Eric Kempton was one of the sufferers, and again he was struck in a tender place.

His wife's favorite horse had disappeared during the horse-stealing epidemic, and this blow deprived her of her jewelry, including some diamonds that were not only valuable, but highly prized by reason of the associations connected with them.

This robbery was quite as perplexing and unaccountable as any of the others, though it was clear that the house had been entered at night, and that the thief had left one of the lower windows open in his exit.

Kempton was so highly indignant at this loss, as well as greatly worried, that he rode to the

Glen to consult about the matter with his friend, Andrew Gartney.

There he learned that the magnate of Glegartney was also one of the sufferers, his office having been entered, his safe opened, and a considerable amount of money taken, mostly in bills.

"I cannot understand it at all, Eric," said the Scotchman. "This is the first time that such work has been done here, and I have never heard of anything of the kind in the neighborhood until recently. There was no stranger in town when I was robbed, except your friend, Manuel del Castro, who stayed with me on my invitation, and of course he is beyond suspicion."

"Of course he is, and I don't know of any person whom I am the least bit inclined to suspect."

The widow of that fellow who was killed at the time of the stage robbery has been well-supplied with money lately."

"I gave it to her—that is, I sent it to her by Del Castro, who took the trouble to go and look after her. We thought that the poor creature ought not to suffer for the fault of her husband."

"I have heard that your friend has been seen with her more than once lately; but had not supposed that a charitable errand took him there. Well, Eric, as this matter is too deep for us, there is only one thing to do."

"What is that?"

"We must send for a smart detective, one of those city chaps who know the ways of professional thieves, and must give him free swing to find the scamp who has been plundering us."

"Better telegraph, then, Uncle Andy, so that your detective can get here before the scamp cleans us all out and decamps."

Eric Kempton mourned the loss of his wife's jewelry, and was worried by it, as he said, nearly out of his life; but he soon had a more substantial cause for grief and worry.

The night after his visit to Andrew Gartney he was aroused from his sleep by the cry of fire!

Tumbling out of bed, he saw from the window of his bedroom that his barn was in a blaze.

It was a barn which he had lately built at a heavy expense, the heavier as all the materials had to be hauled over the mountain roads, and it had been filled with a fine crop of hay and grain; recently gathered, as a preparation for the coming hard winter that was expected.

As soon as he got out of the house he perceived that there was no hope of saving the structure or any of its contents, and he could only stand idly there and see it burn.

Fortunately none of his stock was in the barn, and that was a comfort which was better than nothing.

Mrs. Kempton stood at his side as he watched the sad spectacle, and she wept silently as she thought of the calamities that had recently overtaken the family.

Manuel Del Castro was there, also; but he did not weep.

He pulled his big black mustache, and gave it as his opinion that the fire must have been the work of an incendiary.

There could scarcely be a doubt of this, and the fact became clearer when another alarm of fire was raised.

This time it was the dwelling-house that was burning, and the strangest thing about it was that the fire had not been discovered sooner, as it could not be supposed that the incendiary had kept at work while the family were up and about.

It appeared, however, upon subsequent investigation, that the fire must have been started some time previously, and that it had smoldered along, gradually burning its way through the heavy logs, until it had entered and attacked the interior of the house.

It would have been noticed sooner, if the attention of all about the premises had not been absorbed by the burning barn.

Immediately all were as intently absorbed in endeavoring to extinguish this new conflagration; but they found the task more difficult than they might have supposed it to be, as the creeping fire had taken such a hold on the inside of the house that one room was already in a bright blaze.

Hard work was required to save the dwelling from complete destruction, and the rising of the sun found Crow Nest in a sadly dreary and dismantled condition.

As a matter of serious and solemn fact, not only were the barn and its contents quite destroyed, but the dwelling-house might as well have been, as it was so badly damaged that it could not be properly repaired except by a new one.

"It was the work of an incendiary," said Manuel del Castro, again, as if that was the only consolation he could give the sufferers.

"I suppose it was," replied Kempton, "but I have not an enemy about here that I know of, and who could have been the incendiary?"

This question was answered by one of the ranch hands, who came riding up at that moment, highly excited.

"Your barn and house was sot fire to, Mr. Kempton," said he.

"So we suppose. Do you know who did it?"

"I am dead sure of that. It was the Witch of Shasta."

"Why, Manuel, that is the widow of the stage robber, the woman we have been helping. It does not seem possible that she can have done that thing."

"I should say that the idea is highly absurd," responded the Cuban.

"She is the critter that did it, though," declared the man who brought the news. "I was the first one to see the blaze and raise the yell, and as soon as I hollered I saw her ridin' away from behind the barn. Then I was up and after her as soon as I could git onto my hoss; but she gave me the slip, and I lost sight of her, and so I came back to tell you about it."

Further questioning convinced all concerned that there was no mistake about the matter, and that the midnight incendiary was no other than the widow of Austin Frias.

"Who would have thought it?" complained Eric Hampton. "I have done for that woman everything she would allow me to do, and I could not have thought that she carried such a grudge against me."

"As you said a while ago, Kempton," remarked the Cuban, "she must belong to the race of wildcats."

As soon as Kempton could leave his family in a decent shelter, he rode away with Del Castro to the cabin that had been occupied by Austin Frias.

When they got there, the cupboard was bare. There was no longer any sign of Maria Frias about the place, and the door stood wide open, inviting the next squatter to take possession of the tenement with the few miserable belongings that were left there.

As for the late occupant, she had disappeared from the Glengartney district, and it was not deemed worth while to follow her up or inquire what had become of her.

Before the day ended, Manuel del Castro took leave of his friends at Crow Nest, and his departure gave Eric Kempton another pang.

"I am sorry on your account, as well as my own," said that gentleman. "that my misfortune has driven us into such small quarters. I had hoped that you would stay with me and enjoy yourself for some time yet."

"I have enjoyed myself highly," replied the Cuban. "I have done very well here, and have cause to be well satisfied with my stay."

CHAPTER VI.

"CONSUMMATE CHEEK."

In a handsome room in the best hotel in San Francisco—it would be invidious to mention the name—Tom Heston was seated, "taking his ease in his inn."

He had what he called a "sweet" of rooms in the hotel, the same being a parlor and a bedroom, and the former was his office and reception-room, as he had no regular place of business, but was known as a speculator who operated through various brokers.

A very bold and successful speculator, too, was Tom Heston. Nobody knew how he got his start, but he had got it, and then he had gone up like a rocket, with no immediate prospect of coming down like a stick.

He was said to be "in with" Flood & O'Brien and the band that followed their fortunes, and there could be no doubt that he made the best possible use of whatever valuable connections he had formed.

Everything he touched, as the old saying is, turned to gold. Perhaps it would be more fitting to say that he was in the position of a man who could turn a faucet and let forth a stream of money at will.

He was, indeed, eminently a prosperous man, and therefore he was highly respected.

It may be safely asserted, too, that there could be no reasonable doubt of the fact that he was the same Tom Heston who had stopped at the cabin of Austin Frias and persuaded that unfortunate individual to go into the business of stage robbery.

There was a decided change in him, to be sure, but it was the change from adversity to prosperity.

The seedy garments of a tramp had been replaced by the fine apparel of a wealthy citizen, and his general appearance had been considerably changed under the benign influence of prosperity; but he was the same Tom Heston still.

He was not alone in his "sweet," his only companion being a bright young broker of German descent, August Beckmann by name, who was intrusted with the greater part of his business.

They were seated by a table that was supplied with wine and liquor, and were smoking cigars of the finest flavor.

"So you may close out all the contracts that you have put on the list," Tom Heston was saying. "I want to get all the rubbish cleared up, with no loose ends lying around, so that I need have nothing to bother me when I am away."

"Is it settled then, that you are going away?" inquired Beckmann.

"I mean to take a trip East, and may be gone only a little while; but I want to have my mind free and clear while I am gone. You see, August, I want to look up those relatives of mine that I spoke of to you about."

"Ah! your wife and child. Some men would want to look them up, while others would be glad to keep out of their sight and hearing. It depends on the people, I suppose."

"Seems to me that you are trying to insinuate something," rejoined Heston. "If it had depended on me, my friend, I would have looked them up long ago, and would have had them here; but you know, yourself, how those things go with a man who is in hard luck. For a long time I was ashamed even to let them know that I was alive. When I became better fixed, I wrote again and again, but got no answer to any of my letters."

"Perhaps your relatives are dead," suggested the broker.

"They may be. I hope it is no worse with them than that."

"No worse?"

"Don't you know, August, that there are plenty of things that are worse than death? But I don't care to talk about it. It is settled that you are to close out the matters on the list, and if there is anything more I will let you know. By the way, when I go East, I may as well mingle a little business with—other things—and place some of that new mining stock that we have got control of. So you may as well put it in shape for me."

"All right. Good-night, old man."

"Good-night. I hope you will do the best you can for me, August."

"You may be sure of that."

When August Beckmann had left the room, Mr. Heston lighted a fresh cigar, and subsided into a reverie.

From this he was shortly aroused by a bell-boy, who brought him a card.

"Mrs. Matson" was the name on the card, and under it was a penciling to the effect that the owner of the name wished to speak to Mr. Heston concerning an investment.

"Confound it!" complained that gentleman. "Can't they let a man have a little rest? I don't know the woman, Johnny. Have I got to go down to the parlor to see her?"

"She said she'd come up, sir, if you'd no objection."

"That way, hey? Well, send her up."

The lady who had sent the card was brought up by the bell-boy, and Maria Frias sailed into Tom Heston's room as proudly as if she owned the earth.

She looked as if she might own a part of it, as she was richly dressed, with a fine display of diamonds, and was apparently younger and manifestly handsomer than when she occupied the shabby cabin with Austin Frias.

As she entered the room, the man's face changed suddenly, and an ashy pallor overspread it.

This change was only for an instant, as his cheeks immediately recovered their color, and his countenance resumed its wonted expression; but it had not escaped the notice of that sharp-eyed woman.

"Good-evening, madam," said Mr. Heston, rising politely. "Will you have the kindness to be seated?"

"I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance," he continued, as he faced her from his chair.

"Indeed!" she answered, with a smile. "I supposed that you knew me."

"If I had met you, Mrs. Matson, I think that I should hardly be likely to forget you; but your face, as well as your name, is unknown to me."

"You may not know the name of Matson, but you may remember the name of Frias."

"I do not recall it."

"You seem to be fortunate in having an accommodating memory. I must try to refresh your recollection. Do you remember the ninth day of last September?"

"I presume that there was a month of September last year, and no doubt it had a ninth day; but I have no special recollection of that day."

"Where were you then?"

"As far as I can remember the month, I must have been in the city of Sacramento."

"There was part of the month, at least, which you did not spend in Sacramento. On the ninth of September you rode up to a cabin near Mount Shasta, which was then occupied by my husband and myself. You found us poor and despairing. You introduced yourself by your own name, which was an unwise thing to do, if you did not mean to deal fairly by us."

"Quite unnecessary," assented Heston.

"Unwise, too. You treated us to whisky from your flask, and proposed to my husband that he should join you in a stage robbery."

"It was very kind in me to treat you to my whisky."

"Yes, we took it kindly."

"But it was preposterous that I should make such a proposition to a stranger."

"You were looking for a partner, and it happened that he was the sort of man you wanted. You told us that a man was coming on the stage who had a lot of valuable stock, and you showed us the numbers of the certificates, and I've got the numbers now."

"You surprise me. Was I sober?"

"As sober as you are now. My husband agreed to join you, and at night you and he rode off together to hold up the stage. You did hold up the stage, and you found the traveler you were looking for, and you knocked him in the head and robbed him of his stock."

"This is getting interesting," observed Heston. "May I offer you a little wine, or anything else?"

"Some anything else, if you please. Thank you. This is not the first time I have had the pleasure of drinking with you."

"So you say. What became of the man whom I knocked in the head?"

"He never recovered from the blow. He is alive, but insane, as I have been informed. Say, Mr. Heston, who is telling this story—I, or you?"

"Beg pardon for interrupting. Nobody can tell it but you."

"You could tell it well enough, if you would. Well, sir, you and my husband were surprised at your work by some mounted men, who fired at you and pursued you. My husband was hit, and he was dead when he reached home; but you escaped."

"I am very glad that I escaped. Will you help yourself, or shall I pour it out for you. It is very kind of you to bring me out of the scrape so neatly; but I am sorry for your husband and the other man, now, Mrs. Matson—"

"Frias, sir, to you."

"Any name you please. It is all the same to me. No doubt you are as free as air to call yourself what you choose."

"Is that meant for a pun upon my name, sir?"

"It is a fact, I believe. Well, Mrs. Frias, your story is an exciting one, and, as far as I am concerned, there is only one thing the matter with it."

"What is that?"

"That you have got hold of the wrong man. Presuming that you believe the story as you have told it to me, there has been some strange mistake, or you have been made the victim of a very sharp deception. I was never in my life within sight of Mount Shasta."

"I know that you were there on the date I named."

"During the entire month of September I was nowhere near the northern part of the State."

"I cannot be mistaken, Mr. Heston. I am not mistaken. Not only did the man have your name, but he had your size, your shape, your face and eyes, your look, your tone, everything that you have except the good clothes you are wearing now. In fact, he was you."

"It would not be the first time that my name has been assumed, or even forged, and it is quite possible that some person who bore a close resemblance to me has discovered that fact and sought to use it for his benefit and my injury. It is one of the penalties of wealth that its possessor must be preyed on by scoundrels and sharpers, both male and female, and I have been greatly beset by them. It would astound you, madam, to know what audacious statements they make. Only a few days ago a woman came here whom I had never before seen, who claimed that I had been secretly married to her at San Bernardino, and that I was the father of her two children, and I am not by any means the only one upon whom such schemes have been worked."

Maria Frias looked at him as if her gaze might pierce his very soul; but she might as well have stared at a brazen image, for all the effect her look had.

"I suppose so," she said. "I have heard of that sort of thing. But you must not class me, Mr. Heston, with sharpers and blackmailers. I have told you a true and straight story, and I know that you are the man who went with my husband to rob that stage. I can say for you that you have the most consummate cheek of any man I ever met."

"Thank you. That is the kind of compliment that suits me. I can only say, madam, that there has been a mistake or a deception. Whichever it is, I have nothing to do with it, and now, if you please, you may tell me what the investment is which you want to consult me about."

"My share of the proceeds of that stage-robbery," promptly replied the woman.

"If you have got your share, madam, I can recommend a good investment."

"I have not got it, but have come here to get it from you."

"As I don't happen to have it, the business seems to fall through."

"It does not fall through. You got from that traveler the stock you wanted, and you have grown rich from it. I demand from you, as the representative of my dead husband, at least half the value of that stock at the time you got it."

"As it is clearly useless to argue that point with you, madam, I refuse your demand, and that ends the matter."

"Not much, Mr. Heston. I have come to stay, and I mean to stick to you until I get my rights. If kind words won't avail, I must try the old farmer's plan, and begin to throw stones. How would you like to be arrested on a charge of stage-robbery, and have the charge proved against you? That would be rather rough on you in your present position."

"Why, yes, so it would, and yet it would be nothing more than annoyance. It would seem queer to my business friends; but none of them could be persuaded to believe the charge, especially as I would have no difficulty in showing that I was in Sacramento at the date you mention. No, my dear madam, it won't work at all. So I will bid you good-evening, with one last word. I have been assuming, so far, that you are honestly mistaken; but, if you go any further, or trouble me any more, I shall set it down as a case of blackmail, and take steps accordingly. Will you have another glass? No? Good-evening, then, and you need not come again."

"I shall know what to do, though," replied Maria Frias, as she sailed out of the room.

CHAPTER VII. A TOUGH SUBJECT.

"THE impudence of the man!" muttered Maria Frias, as she left the hotel. "I would never have believed it possible that any human being could lie so abominably with such a straight face."

She went immediately, at a rapid pace and by the most direct route, to a first-class boarding-house, where she had installed herself in an elegant room, receiving there the respect that was due to her apparent position.

In her own apartment she found waiting for her, quite according to the custom of the country, a young man of Spanish appearance and stylishly dressed, in whom Eric Kempton would at once have recognized his friend, Manuel del Castro.

He was smoking a cigar, as if he felt quite at home there, but seemed to be rather restless and impatient.

"You have been gone a long time," he said as she entered the room.

"I have not stopped to play marbles, though," she sharply answered. "I have been attending to business from the word go; but the job was a tougher one than I thought it would be."

"Did you find the man?"

"Easy enough. I have been with him ever since I left you, except the little time that it took me to walk to the hotel and back."

"Was he the right man?"

"No doubt in the world of that—the same Tom Heston who stopped at the cabin up yonder, and who persuaded my husband to go with him and rob that stage."

"That is satisfactory! Was he willing to come to terms?"

"Come to nothing! Not a bit of it. There was no doing anything with him. I tell you, Manuel, I never saw such a man, and I have come across some tough subjects. His cheek is a mountain of quartz. But I've got the dynamite to blow it up, and I will shatter it before I am done with him."

"What is the matter with him?"

"Just his cheek, and that is a world's wonder. He is such a monumental liar as would make old Ananias turn green with envy. I naturally supposed, innocent as I was, that when he knew what I knew about him, he would climb down as gracefully as he could, surrender, and propose some sort of a settlement of the case."

"Just what I supposed he would do, if he is the man."

"And he is the man. I know it, and he knows that I know it. But he did nothing of the kind. He had the immaculate impudence to deny the whole thing, and he did it as calmly and blandly as a babe sucking milk, and through the entire interview he had the assurance to treat me as if he suspected me of being something in the style of a harmless lunatic."

"Which you are not, Maria?"

"Not harmless, anyhow. All this time, Manuel, he was smiling at me while I was looking him straight in the face, and he knew that the story was true, and that I knew it to be true, and that the chances were that I could prove it to be true. It was the most amazing thing I ever witnessed."

"How did he wriggle out of it?"

"He didn't wriggle, or crawl, or climb. He just walked right through it like a man. He said that he had never in his life been in sight of Mount Shasta, and that during all of last September he was nowhere near the northern part of the State. When I spoke of a criminal charge, he said that he would not have the slightest difficulty in proving an *alibi*, and he wound up by remarking that if I bothered him any more about the matter, he would treat it as a case of blackmail."

"Is it not possible, Maria, that you may have struck the wrong party?"

"Not the faintest suspicion of a possibility. The name was nothing, but I know the man. I

could swear to him as certainly as I can swear to you."

"Of course, then, he must have known you, and it seems to be simply impossible that he should have the face to try to lie out of it, or that he should be so foolish as to suppose that the scheme of lying would work."

"That is what hurt me. I had my wits fully about me, as I always have, and I believed myself to be fully a match for that man, especially as the facts gave me all the advantage I could ask for; but the coolness and calmness with which he lied to me upset me so that I could not begin to hold my own with him. I could only sit and stare at him, amazed beyond expression at the easy way in which he set me aside."

"If you were amazed beyond expression, Maria, the exhibition must have been truly wonderful. There can be no mistake, then?"

"No chance of a mistake. I knew the man as soon as I saw him, and the first look he gave me told me that he knew me as well as I knew him. Then he braced up, all of a sudden, and went in for solid lying. There is plenty of outside evidence, too. You know, yourself, that we traced him up, that he had been nothing but a poor devil before the ninth of September, and that his rise in life dated from that stage-robbery. Mistake? I should say not."

"I believe you. I am as firmly convinced as you are that this Heston is the man, and the only question is how we are to get at him—that is, what way will pay best—and that is something that we must give our best thought to. I have a bit of an idea; but it is not in shape yet."

"What is it, Manuel?"

"I will tell you later. Have you heard from Rosa? When is she to be here?"

"This evening, perhaps—to-morrow, at latest. You seem to have your head set on that girl."

"Yes, my head is set on her, and so is my heart. If she has grown up to be what she promised to be—and I have no doubt of that—I want her for my wife."

"Help me out in this business, Manuel, and when it is straightened out there will be no objection on my part."

"Quite the contrary is what I shall expect. Of course I will leave nothing undone to help you; but we ought to make the strike pretty soon, as your expenses and mine are very heavy here. Fortune was kind to me up yonder, and I do not feel poor. The cards have been running in my favor down here, too; but money is going fast, and we must look ahead."

"I am willing to strike quick and hard, but what ought to be the next move?"

The Cuban puffed his cigar, and considered the subject quietly.

"Your threat of a criminal charge," said he, "was all very well as a threat; but, if it amounted to nothing in that way, that is all there is of it."

"Why, Manuel, I am sure that it could be proved. There is my evidence, clear and direct, and I would dare anybody to impeach me. There was another passenger in the stage, who saw Heston plain enough, and who could swear to him if he should see him again. And then, there are other circumstances, as you know."

"I was not doubting your ability to prove the charge, Maria. My suggestion was that it would not pay, as it would put an end to your hopes of getting money out of the man. It would never do to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs, or is expected to lay them. If the goose positively refuses to lay eggs, then the other scheme may come in by way of revenge, but not until better means have been tried."

"What better means do you propose to try?"

"I will explain them to you when I have tried them. Speaking generally, I mean to get hold of him and put on the screws. I have taken a hand in the game myself, and will not need your help. My plan is not fully formed as yet; but I shall strike, as you said, quick and hard, if I strike at all."

"I give you warning, Manuel, that you will find him the toughest subject you ever tried to handle."

"You have already told me that."

"I have no doubt that he is laughing now at the coolness with which he faced me down and overwhelmed me with his lies."

"He will have no chance to lie to me, if my scheme works well."

CHAPTER VIII.

TWIXT CUP AND LIP.

IF Maria Frias could have seen Tom Heston when she last spoke of him, as above recorded, she would not have said that he was laughing at his coolness or anything else.

As soon as she had left his room at the hotel, he locked the door behind her, and dropped into his chair, where he remained for several minutes in what looked like a state of collapse.

His face was so pallid as to be a most ghastly, and his eyes stared at the mantelpiece like those of a corpse.

After a while he roused himself, and entered upon a series of recuperative measures.

While the woman was in his room, he had only sipped a little wine; but then he poured out one glass of whisky after another, and gulped them down as if the liquid fire was needed to keep his blood from freezing.

It seemed to have that effect, as he walked briskly about the room, and frowned as he walked.

"That was a pull," he muttered. "I don't believe I could stand it again. I don't need to do it, anyhow. Let me see."

He looked at his watch, and perceived that the hour was late.

"No use trying to do anything to-night," he said. "I will turn in and see what I can get by sleeping the thing over."

Before going to bed he helped himself to another rousing bumper of whisky, which sent him into a stupor that served in place of sleep.

In the morning he was up early, and, after a vigorous application of cold water, he went down to his breakfast as fresh as a lark and apparently as free from care.

Instead of waiting for his broker to come to his office, he sought Beckmann at his house, and surprised that gentleman by an early visit.

"What's up now, Heston?" inquired the broker. "It must be something unusual, to bring you here at this early hour."

"Something unusual, yes, but perhaps not very important. It is rather a whim of mine than anything else. I have got some news from the East this morning, August, and it makes me want to get on there as soon as possible. So I came to notify you, with regard to those contracts we spoke of last night, that we must close them out as quickly as we can, and I would like to have all my business here cleared up to-day."

"That is a little too much to ask, Heston; but I will do my best."

August Beckmann did his best, and Tom Heston did his best, and their best meant quick and effective work, and the affairs in which they were engaged kept them busy all through the day and far into the night, and even then the transactions were not completed to the satisfaction of the capitalist and speculators.

Having done all he could do, he set out to go from Beckmann's house to his hotel, and his route took him near the wharves, in a section of the city which life insurance companies might have noted as "extra dangerous."

There was no thought of danger, however, in the mind of Tom Heston, who was a strong and active man, accustomed to taking care of himself under all sorts of circumstances, and who had no enemies that he knew of, unless the person who had visited him the previous night could be called an enemy, and that person was a woman.

Yet he walked with caution, as his custom was, looking about him warily as he went.

In spite of his wariness, however, he was surprised and pounced upon by two men, who darted out from a narrow and dark space between two houses, in a neighborhood which was at that hour apparently quiet and peaceable.

So sudden was this attack, and so skillfully was it made, that any effective resistance was out of the question.

His head was muffled, and his hands were strapped at the wrists behind his back, almost before he knew what had happened to him, and he was immediately rushed into the open door of an empty and dark room on the ground floor of the house in front of which he had been seized.

That door was closed and locked behind him, and he was passed through another door into a dimly-lighted room, which was also empty, except for a table and a few chairs.

On one of the chairs he was seated, and the muffer was removed from his head, allowing him to see the persons by whom he had been captured and dragged in.

There were two of them, as has been noted. One was a young man, well dressed, with a heavy black mustache, and a Spanish or Mexican cast of countenance. The other was an ordinary, every-day rounder or ruffian, shabbily dressed, stout of build, and rather brutal of appearance.

The former had seated himself, facing the captive, and the latter, who had probably been hired for the "job," stood and watched the captive, as if ready to pounce upon him again at a signal.

The captive, as soon as the muffer had been removed from his head, seemed to have recovered his composure—if he had ever lost it—and to take matters more easily than either of the other two.

He sat up straight in his chair, and addressed himself to the man who sat opposite him.

"This is a fine game," said he, "and I judge that it has been well played so far; but I must confess that I don't understand it, and if I am to take a hand in it, I must know more about it. Who is the dealer?"

"I am the dealer, Mr. Tom Heston," answered the man he addressed, and whom Heston might have recognized as Manuel del Castro, if he had ever made the acquaintance of that individual.

"I am the dealer, sir, and I will tell you

plainly what the part is that you have to play in this game."

"Proceed, then. That is just what I want to know."

"Well, sir, you were visited last night by a lady."

"Something of that sort, I believe."

"A lady named Mrs. Frias."

"Matson was the name she gave, but she changed it after a while to the name you mention."

"You have some property in your possession which belongs to her, or in which she has a half interest, and she came to you to claim it."

"She told me a wild sort of a story about some affair of which I knew nothing, and with which I had nothing to do."

"She told you, Mr. Heston, about a speculation, as I may call it, which you went into with her husband, and from which you took all the profits, and she insisted, as the representative of her husband, upon receiving her share of those profits."

"Something in that line, if you choose to put it so, but there was not a word of truth in the story. She went on to threaten me, and I would have disposed of the matter in short order if it had been a man I had to deal with. As it was a woman, I could only insinuate that it looked to me like a case of blackmail."

"So you say; but you must allow me to credit her statement, instead of yours, especially as I have good reasons for believing that she tells the truth. You have come into possession of a large amount of property, of which she is entitled to an equal share with you. As she told you, when kind words do not avail, it is necessary to throw stones, and I am throwing the stones for her."

"The proceeding does seem to be rather rocky, as far as it has gone. Well, sir, whoever you may be—by the way, who are you?"

"My name is Manuel Del Castro."

"I shall remember it, if I live to remember anything. Well, Mr. Del Castro, I would like to know, what sort of stones you propose to throw at me."

"I propose, Mr. Tom Heston, that you shall pay to me for Mrs. Frias, or secure to me for her, her full and rightful share of the profits of that speculation, as I call it. You will consent to that before you leave here. That is to say, I have got you in my power, and you won't get away from me until you submit to my terms."

"That makes a change in the affair, then." What the woman proposed to me last night was nothing more than blackmail. What you propose to me now is highway robbery."

"It is no such thing!" fiercely replied the Cuban, as he struck the table with his fist. "It is the right way to get at the right thing—that is what it is—and you won't leave this place until you settle that account."

As the Cuban pounded on the table, there was a key in his fist, and the quick eyes of the captive noted it as the key of the outer door.

A sudden light flashed into his eyes, but not a muscle of his face moved.

"Just so," he quietly replied. "As it is clearly a case of my money or my life, and I naturally prefer to keep my life, the only question is, how much money do you want?"

"Fifty thousand dollars."

"That is a large sum of money. I wonder if my life is worth so much. Well, I believe I would be willing to pay even that price for it just now, and I suppose that I will be forced to comply with your demand."

"The easiest way is the best," suggested Del Castro.

"It is a pretty hard way at the best, as I take it. Of course you don't expect me to carry that amount of money about me. In what shape will you have it?"

"A check."

"And I suppose you intend keeping me here until you can get the check cashed."

"No doubt of that."

"It will be to my interest, then, to help you get the money as speedily as possible, and I am willing to give you an order on my broker, who always has plenty of cash in his safe and you can see him in the morning before the banks open. That is the best I can do."

"That will suit me," answered the Cuban.

The capitalist had been brought to terms with an ease and a rapidity that were almost suspicious; but what else could he do under the circumstances, with no chance of escape from the trap into which he had fallen?

"Have you pen and paper?" he inquired.

"Of course. I am fixed for business," answered Del Castro, and he placed the required articles on the table before his captive.

"These are not all the tools that are needed," observed Heston.

"What more do you want?"

"A pair of hands. You surely can't expect me to write an order for fifty thousand dollars with my hands tied behind my back."

This was a reasonable statement, and it was evident that the captive must be allowed the use of his hands.

Why should he not be released to that extent?

He had been disarmed, and his captors were two to one, each with a revolver, and the only means of exit was a locked door. Escape under the circumstances was a contingency that scarcely needed to be guarded against.

Del Castro nodded to his assistant, who stepped behind the captive, and Heston stood up to allow the man to get at his hands, at the same time edging around a corner of the table.

Behind him was the able-bodied rough, in an advantageous position to subdue any attempt at rebellion, and before him the Cuban ostentatiously displayed a revolver.

"That will do," he remarked, with a smile, rubbing his hands when the strap had been removed.

"That is all right, my friend, and now you shall soon have your document."

"Get to work, then!" ordered Del Castro.

"Have a little patience. My wrists are rather numb, and I must rub some life into them, or I would never know my own handwriting."

He stood there and rubbed his wrists a few moments, talking and smiling after the manner of a conjurer who wishes to distract the minds of his audience from the trick he is about to perform.

Then the scene changed as suddenly as the conjurer might have changed it.

Tom Heston's right fist shot forth like a cannon ball, struck the Cuban on the jaw, and knocked him senseless.

Wheeling instantly, he met the awkward attack of the astonished rounder by seizing his throat with a choking grasp, at the same time giving a dexterous trip that laid him on the floor.

Tom Heston was down as soon as his adversary was, and he pounded the rounder's head on the floor with a force that threatened to crack his skull.

Not satisfied with this discipline, he picked up the strap with which his wrists had been bound, and in a twinkling fastened the hands of his antagonist behind his back.

CHAPTER IX.

STOLE AWAY!

TOM HESTON had turned the tables on his captors so suddenly and unexpectedly, that he was master of the situation, with both of them at his mercy, before they finally knew what was the matter.

It was no wonder that they were upset, as the strength and skill exhibited by their late captive, as well as his quickness and activity, were so remarkable that no such performance could have been anticipated.

No doubt he was a man who had been tried in similar scenes, and his physical strength and courage were both equal to any emergency.

The impossible had occurred, and they were powerless to prevent the further proceedings of the man who had so completely got the better of them.

The Cuban attempted to rise as he began to recover his senses; but a threatening word and gesture from the one man on his feet compelled him to be quiet.

Heston stooped down with his usual quickness and deprived his enemy of the pistol he held in his hand, and of another on his person. Then he took a third revolver from the rounder on the floor.

"I am pretty well fixed now," he said, as he secured the weapons upon his own person. "I have no use for these articles, but I don't want you to have them. I will bid you good-night now, gentlemen, advising you that the next time you tackle a man of my style, you had better know who it is that you are fooling with."

He picked up the key that had fallen on the table, and passed out into the street, locking the outer door behind him, and leaving the key there.

When he reached the street he seemed to be in no hurry, but stepped along leisurely, as if resuming a walk that had been merely for a moment interrupted.

He went direct to his room at the hotel, and no person could have suspected from his appearance or action that he had just escaped an imminent peril.

There was no heavy drinking, as there had been the night before; but he allowed himself a moderate "night-cap" previous to retiring.

"I know now what it means," he said, as he tossed off his dram, "and I can defy them to do their worst. They got me foul once, but are not likely to make the rifle again. I don't think they will get the chance."

He slept until broad daylight as soundly and placidly as if he had not a care on his mind, and in the morning his movements were as regular and methodical as in the ordinary course of his business life.

It was not until the regular opening of business for the day that he called on his broker, and then he was closeted with August Beckmann for several hours, during which time various messages were sent from and received at the room in which they were secluded.

"That settles it, then," said Tom Heston, as he rose to take his leave. "Everything has

been closed out as far as possible, and you must straighten up the odds and ends that are left. Good-by, August. I don't know when I will see you again."

"Are you off right away, Mr. Heston?"

"Very shortly. By the way, August, if anybody should ask you what has become of me, you may say that I have gone to Europe."

"Ain't you getting to be a bit mysterious?"

"I have to be. Between you and me, August, I have just discovered that there is an enemy on my track, and a deadly enemy at that. Last night I came within an inch of losing my life."

"That is serious."

"Quite so. It is a trouble that has come down to me from past years. I could easily beat the fellow's game, with the help of the law or with my own hands; but the easiest way is the best way. As I am going to leave here, anyhow, I may as well slip off from him at the same time."

"Good-by, then, Tom Heston, and may good luck go with you."

"I hope it will. Since I have got on the right side of the luck, I hope I shall have sense enough to keep there."

"You will let me know where you bring up at," suggested the broker.

"Oh, yes; you shall hear from me."

Tom Heston's ways that day continued to be, as Beckmann had styled them, "a bit mysterious."

He sent his baggage off by Express, and early in the afternoon he crossed over to Oakland, where he took a steamboat that was going up the river, and it was not until the next day and at a small station that he boarded a northward-bound train, and then he bought a ticket only for Ogden.

Evidently he objected to being followed or traced.

The night of the day that witnessed the departure of Tom Heston from San Francisco found Manuel del Castro a visitor at the handsome apartment of Maria Frias.

There was a decided bruise on the right side of his forehead, not from the blow that had knocked him down the night before, but from some object that he had struck against as he fell; but he had combed his hair over it, so that only a close inspection would make it visible.

His disposition seemed to have been bruised more deeply than his skin, as he was gloomy, morose, and generally out of sorts.

"What is the matter now, Manuel?" demanded Mrs. Frias. "You look as black as a Shasta thundercloud. Any more bad luck?"

"Just a continuation of the same sort, and the last is the worst. He has given us the slip. He has skipped the town."

"That is not surprising. You scared him off."

"I did the best that could be done, just the right thing, and with any ordinary man my scheme would have succeeded."

"He is not an ordinary man—the most extraordinary man I ever met. I told you so."

"You told me that his cheek was wonderful."

"And his nerve."

"Same thing, Maria. I was prepared for that. But who could have supposed that he would turn out to be a whole regiment, tied up in one parcel? If there ever was anything that I had calculated on as an absolutely sure thing, it was on keeping him and compelling him to come to my terms. Why, I had everything my own way—two of us, both armed, and that fellow helpless. Who could have guessed that he was going to turn himself loose like a tornado and split the scheme to ribbons before we could wink?"

"He ought to have had politeness enough to give you notice of what he meant to do."

"It is easy for you to sneer, Maria; but you know that I did my best."

"I am sure that you meant well, Manuel."

"Did well, too. The business would have turned out all right if I had known the kind of man I had to deal with. He is a wildcat. He is a terror."

"He is a hard man to manage in every way. I know that well enough. Where has he gone to?"

"That is more than I have found out yet, though I have my suspicions. He has slipped away secretly, and has covered his tracks carefully."

"But such a man as he, a business man, one who is so well known, cannot get away without leaving a trail."

"I suppose there is a trail, though it is a blind one so far, and I have my suspicions, as I told you."

"What are they? What have you found out?"

"I have been looking after him sharply enough, I can assure you. When I learned that he had left the hotel, I stayed about there and watched for his baggage; but nothing that I could fix upon as his went to any train or boat. There was a trunk sent by Express, marked T. Harrison, New York, and I guessed it to be his, because I heard that there had been no person of that name in the hotel."

"What did you do then?"

"I found out who his broker was, and sent a friend to him, who wanted to see Mr. Tom Hes-

ton. My friend was told that Mr. Tom Heston had gone to Europe."

"Has he?"

"Do you expect me to know everything? He has left the city and I have not been able to find out how or when he left. He may have started to go to Europe; but I believe he has gone to New York, anyhow."

"We will go to New York, then."

"Look here, Maria; do you suppose that my money is going to last forever? We have been spending it—you and I—very freely."

"But you have been adding to it. All has not been outgo. You can make money in New York as well as you can here. Fresh fields and pastures new, you know, are apt to be fattening. We must have money, and we will have it, in one way or another. Yes, Manuel, we will go to New York."

"I don't really like the notion."

"Rosa will go with us, of course."

"That so? We will go to New York, then. But we need not be in a great hurry. I have some inquiries to make about here, which it will be worth while to make before we start."

"Very well. There is no great hurry. The more we can learn, the better we will be fixed."

CHAPTER X.

THE WISH AND THE ANSWER.

"I WISH I had a rich father!"

The aspiration and its utterance were quite excusable, considering the great difference that was apparent between the girl and her surroundings; for Lucy Mandely was surely much too fair and too fine for the circumstances in which she found herself.

Two rooms on the third floor of a tenement-house on Rivington street in the city of New York formed the abode of herself and her mother, and one of those was their bedroom, while the other served as workshop and sitting-room, kitchen and dining-room.

Her mother, a faded and sad-eyed woman, from whose face the look of refinement had not been worn away, sighed deeply as her daughter spoke that wish.

She was seated close to the oil lamp, putting buttonholes in the garments which Lucy had been making on the sewing machine.

It was early in the evening, and they had some hours of work before them yet.

Mrs. Mandely sighed; but a third person in the room smiled at Lucy's wish, and that person was a young man.

This young man was not more than half a dozen years older than Lucy, and she was but eighteen.

Though not handsome, he had a strong and attractive face, and his physical appearance generally was suggestive of sinewy strength and trained activity.

His hands were hard and soiled, as if he gained his living by manual labor, and his clothing, though neat and becoming, was of cheap quality.

"That is a reasonable wish, Lucy," he said as he smiled. "Most girls would rather wish for a rich husband. As a father comes only once in a lifetime, and as husbands may be multiplied, perhaps they have the best of it."

"You know what I mean, George Warner."

"Yes, you want to be rich, and I wish you might be. I wish that every wish of yours might be fulfilled, and I believe that even riches would be a blessing to you."

"Even riches? You are a queer fellow, George. What could be a greater blessing?"

"Some folks can't stand prosperity, you know. I sympathize with you, Lucy; but I wish you would call me Winck."

"It is such an ugly name."

"That's why I stick to it. My mother used to tell me that there is luck in an ugly name."

"You haven't got much luck out of it yet."

"But the luck will come. When I was named George Winck Warner after my rich Uncle Winck, it wasn't thought that I would have to work for my living in a machine-shop. But Uncle Winck, instead of transferring his property to me in any shape, just went away and never gave me another thought. If he would turn up about this time and make me his heir, I would be thankful for the lift."

"I don't believe that you are any more likely to see a rich uncle, George, than I am likely to see a rich father."

"That's so. It is to be supposed that the one don't exist, any more than the other. I was thinking what a help a rich uncle would be to me just now, when I want to put my new engine and boiler before the public. But I will be rich before long without that help."

"By means of the engine and boiler?"

"Well, I am betting on the boiler more than on the engine; but I have an iron-clad patent on the whole concern, and it is bound to get a chance, and then up I go! When I go up, Lucy, you and your mother shall go with me."

"Thank you, and I hope that you won't go up in a balloon, but that your ugly name will bring you the best of luck."

"That is a good wish for me to carry away, and I will say good-evening."

"Are you going so soon?" inquired Mrs. Mandely.

"I must. I have an engagement to meet a man who wants to look into my patent, and I had but half an hour to spare. Of course I wanted to put it in here."

The young man went out, and the mother and daughter sighed as the latter resumed her work.

"George Warner is a real good fellow," observed Lucy.

"Yes; but so sanguine. He never seems to think of the hard lot of inventors, and I am afraid that he will be sadly disappointed."

"Oh, he will get on. He has plenty of brains and push, and is as steady as clockwork. Disappointments will come, of course, but they will only make him try harder. He will pass them over, and keep going straight ahead. But how absurd it was, mother, for us poor working people to be talking about riches in this room!"

The widow sighed.

"And how silly it was for me to wish that I had a rich father. My father is dead, and my step-father is dead, and I am not likely to find another."

"That is one wish that you can never get, my poor child."

A vehicle stopped in the street in front of the tenement-house.

"What is that?" demanded Lucy.

"A grocer's wagon or a butcher's cart. What else could it be?"

Heavy steps were heard in the hall below and on the stair.

"If that is the German tailor," remarked Mrs. Mandely, "he must be coming home drunk very early."

The steps stopped at the door of the room, and there was a heavy knock.

Mrs. Mandely started, and dropped her work, but Lucy, bold as a lion, though a trifle pale, stepped to the door and opened it.

There stood a man whom she did not know—a tall and large middle-aged man, with grizzled hair and beard, well-dressed, and with the appearance of a person of wealth and position.

"Whom do you wish to see?" she inquired rather timidly.

"Mrs. Heston," answered the heavy voice of the stranger.

The widow uttered a sharp cry, started up, and staggered toward the door.

There she stood, with one hand on the table as if to support her, and with death-white face stared at the stranger.

By that time he had stepped inside, and closed the door, and he smiled through his beard as he faced her.

Lucy had moved a little to one side, and was evidently wondering what the scene meant.

"Come, now, Isabel," said the stranger, in those rough but pleasant tones of his, "don't look as if you had caught sight of a ghost. I am solid enough, Lord knows. Don't you know me? Of course you do. Tom Heston—your husband."

Another cry burst from the woman's lips, but it was very faint, and she seemed to be about to fall.

Lucy sprang to her mother's assistance; but the man raised her and placed her in a chair.

"She will soon be over this," he said. "Nothing is the matter with her—only a sort of shock from the surprise. Get her a drink of water, little one, and she will be all right in a jiffy."

Lucy did as she was requested, gave her mother the water, and stood and stared at the stranger as if she meant to read and study him all through.

"Just as I told you," said he, as Mrs. Mandely opened her eyes and raised her head. "She will be ever so much better after a little. I am the sort of medicine that is a bit weakening at first, but a right good tonic in course of time. Here I am, Isabel. The same old Tom Heston, but more of me in every way. Better late than never, hey? Of course you didn't expect to see me, not having heard a word from me in so many years."

"I thought you were dead," murmured Mrs. Mandely.

"Quite natural that you should, and no credit to me that I have turned up at this late day."

"And I married again."

"The thunder! Where's the other man?"

"He is dead."

"Well, that is quite consoling to me, if not to him. Saves a heap of trouble. Don't think that I am going to blame you for marrying again. It would have been no fault of mine if you hadn't. The fact is, Isabel, that I knew all about that business before I came here to-night. Found it out while I was looking you up. The name of Number Two was Mandely, and he was a nice kind of a man, but unfortunate. I've not been unfortunate—that is, not lately—and I hope you will give me a chance to make some amends to you for the past."

Mrs. Heston, as it must now be proper to style the woman who had believed herself to be a widow, sat motionless and silent, as if unable fully to comprehend her situation.

Lucy was still studying Tom Heston, as if not only "sizing him up" generally, but mentally estimating his money value.

It was but a little while since she had been wishing for a rich father.

Was this such a father as she had wished for? It was at least reasonable to conclude that he was not poor.

"And so this is Lucy," he observed as he turned and faced her. "Little Lucy, who was scarcely more than a baby when I last saw her. Not a bit like a baby now, but a grown young lady, and as handsome as you please. She will be a credit to—well, no matter about that now. Isabel, are you feeling better?"

"Where have you been, all these years?" feebly inquired his wife.

"In California and out that way. But I will have plenty of time to tell you all that when you are settled down and nice and comfortable. I must get you out of this horrid hole right away, and I have got a decent sort of a home up town ready to take you to. Come, put on your things, and we will start."

"Is it far?" asked Lucy. "Mamma is not at all strong."

"Yes, it is rather far; but you won't have to walk, I can promise you. I've got a sort of a conveyance below here, and the trip will be an easy one. Come, Lucy, help your mother to get ready, and you had both better put on your best things, and I wish you would hurry up."

Mrs. Heston was so dazed and bewildered that she was incapable of arriving at any decision or taking any action; but Lucy, who had evidently made up her mind, attended to all that with no hesitation or delay.

Asking her father to excuse them for a few moments, she led her mother into the back room, and closed the door.

Tom Heston, left to himself, looked about the room in a supercilious way, with the air of one who takes in everything at a glance.

"Looks as if they have been having hard times, those two," he muttered. "Reckon I didn't turn up here a bit too soon."

CHAPTER XI.

THE ROMANCE A REALITY.

MRS. HESTON and her daughter speedily made themselves ready, and returned to the room in which Tom Heston was seated.

They were attired in their best, but the best was poor enough, and it had been no difficult matter for them to decide what they should wear, as they had scarcely more than a change.

Lucy took upon herself the charge of her mother, who was passive in her hands, being as yet too much bewildered to have any definite views or express any clear opinions. The girl, however, was determined to take the responsibility and "see the thing through," whatever might come of it. It was all too good to be true, but the romance might prove to be reality, and she was not going to miss any chances.

"We are ready, sir," she simply said.

She did not address the stranger as her father, because she was not sure of anything yet, and, until her mother should be in a condition to explain matters, she was not inclined to accept him absolutely as what he claimed to be.

He led the way out, and Lucy closed and locked the door of the room, putting the key in her pocket, as if she and her mother were merely going out on business or to make a call, expecting to return immediately.

Down the dirty stairs and through the shabby halls they followed the heavy steps of their leader, and when they passed out at the general door another surprise awaited them.

The "conveyance" of which Tom Heston had spoken was an elegant carriage, apparently new, and on the box was a well-dressed coachman.

Mr. Heston assisted his companions to enter, and seated himself at his wife's side, and the carriage was driven away rapidly.

"This is the first time I was ever in anything so fine as this," observed Lucy.

"It won't be the last time, though," answered her father.

After that he relapsed into silence, as if he feared that he might say too much, speaking only now and then in an undertone to his wife, who was gradually recovering from her recent shock, while Lucy's fair cheeks glowed with the excitement of the drive.

The ride was a long but rapid one, and the carriage soon passed out of the tenement region of the city, up the Bowery, into Fourth avenue, and from there into aristocratic Madison avenue.

Finally the stop was made in front of a large and elegant house which well deserved to be styled a mansion. It was clear that none but rich people could live there, and Lucy's eyes opened wider in wonder and anticipation.

Tom Heston led his companions up the brown-stone steps, and rung the bell. It was answered by a serving man, who ushered them into a large room on the first floor. This was one of the parlors, and back of it was another, and both were handsomely and luxuriously furnished.

"Sit down," said he, "and make yourselves at home."

"Have you really taken rooms in this fine house?" inquired his wife.

"Well, no, not exactly; but I wanted you to look at the place."

"Where is the lady of the house?"

"She has just come up from Rivington street

with her daughter, and isn't used to things yet. But here comes the housekeeper, and she will show you the shop."

A tidy middle-aged woman came into the room, bringing a bunch of keys.

"Here are my wife and daughter, Mrs. Dall, and I will leave you to show them about the house, while I step into my den and have my smoke. I don't know how it will be with you, Isabel, but Mrs. Dall will not allow me to smoke in the parlors."

The tour of inspection must have been productive of an increase of astonishment to Mrs. Heston and Lucy, as their eyes were wide open with wonder when they sought Tom Heston in his "den."

It was a small but comfortably furnished room in the rear of the house, and he was seated in an easy-chair, smoking a brierwood pipe.

"I cannot understand this," said Mrs. Heston as she timidly sunk into a seat. "Is it possible that you are the owner of this elegant house?"

"It might be possible, but isn't the fact. I don't happen to own the house. You are the owner. By the way, here is the deed. It has been recorded, and the shanty is absolutely yours, and nobody can take it from you. I have fixed up this room as a den for myself, and will retain it if you will let me; but it rests with you to say whether I shall stay here or not."

"Let you? Why, of course we will let you. What would we do without you?"

"As for that, you can get along without me very well, as you will both be independent. Here are your bank-books, one for each, and you will see that there is a pretty good pile to your credit, which you can draw on as you please. I will be glad to stay here, though, if you have no objection, and it is really a good thing to have a man in the house."

"You must be a very rich man," suggested Lucy.

"Yes, I suppose I might be called a rich man now."

"How much are you worth?"

"Well, now, that's a straight question; but it is hard for a man in my circumstances to say what he is worth. Perhaps it would pan out a million and a half—not so much as two millions, I think."

"That is a vast amount of money."

"How did you get so much money?" inquired Mrs. Heston.

"Ah! that is what I had to tell you, and after, all, there is little to tell. All there is of it has happened within a short time. When I left here, broken down by bad luck, I went to California, hoping to find a change of fortune; but it didn't come. For years I worked like a slave, and tried all sorts of experiments; but things got worse and worse, and poverty never lost its grip on me."

"And in all that time you never wrote to me, and I thought you were dead."

"I was as good as dead. I didn't care whether I lived or died, and supposed that there couldn't be anybody in the world worse off than I was. I was so low down that I had given up everything, including myself. But I am not going to apologize. Here I am, and you must take me as you find me, if you will have me at any price."

"We are both glad to get you," remarked Lucy.

"Thank you, and I am glad to be here. At last, my luck turned, and set in strong the other way. It never rains but it pours, you know. I got in on the Comstock Lode—of course, you know what that is?"

They both shook their heads.

"Well, I suppose you women-folks never read the papers. The Comstock Lode is a big thing, anyhow. In a little while, and without doing a stroke of work, I got what I had spent years of toil for and hadn't begun to touch it. As soon as I had a start, my money bred money, and my wealth increased so fast that it made my head swim."

"Even then you sent me no word," insisted Mrs. Heston.

"Then I wrote, and the Dead Letter Office got the letters. I had no address, and did not know how to get at you. Just then, too, my speculations—for that was the way I made my money—absorbed all my time and attention. I had a chance to get rich suddenly, and set my mind upon making the most of the chance, and succeeded. As soon as I could straighten things out, so that I could get away, I came on to look you up, and here I am, and here you are, and all I ask is that by-gones shall be by-gones."

"By-gones shall be by-gones," said his wife, who was thinking of the complication of her second marriage while her husband was living. If she had known it, however, she was justified in that by the law of New York.

"Besides this house and the bank accounts," continued Tom Heston, "I shall immediately settle upon you two enough to make you independent. I don't pretend to be able to atone for the past, but will do my best in the present, while I am able to. As for me, an unlucky speculation may sweep away my resources, or I may turn up missing any day. You mustn't be surprised at anything that may happen to me; but you shall be safe, anyhow."

Whatever response might have followed, this surprising declaration was prevented by the entrance of a servant to announce that supper was ready.

Though unaccustomed to such a luxury, and doubting the propriety of eating at that hour, Mrs. Heston and her daughter went in to supper, and were amazed at the elegant repast that was set out, amid a profusion of silver plate and cut-glass and china.

The transition from the tenement-rooms of Rivington street to that abode of wealth and plenty was too much like a dream to be fully appreciated just yet, and several times they glanced at their shabby apparel, as if feeling that they were incongruous objects in the midst of all that elegance.

"Yes," observed Tom Heston, catching the unexpressed idea, "you are rather out of place here at present, as far as looks go; but that won't last long. To-morrow you must take the carriage, and fill your pockets with money, and lay in a stock of dry-goods and notions, and I hope you won't stint yourselves. In the mean time you may have the satisfaction of feeling that you own what there is here."

"We must go down to our rooms and get our things," suggested Mrs. Heston.

"No hurry about that, I hope. If you have left anything there that you want, you will drive down and get it, and perhaps you know some poor people to whom you can give the rest."

When Lucy Heston retired that night to a luxurious apartment, she almost believed that the romance had become a reality, and was entranced by visions of unlimited dry-goods and millinery.

CHAPTER XII.

"PERFECT LOVE IS PERFECT FAITH."

MRS. HESTON and Lucy did not launch out at once into a career of extravagance.

They had been so long accustomed to the practice of small economies, that they could not forego the habit when there was no longer any occasion for it.

Besides, they could not rid themselves of the fancy that there was something temporary and unsettled about their new position.

The settlements of which Tom Heston had spoken were duly made, and they were the undisputed and absolute owners of what seemed to them to be unlimited wealth; but it might go as quickly as it had come, and they might wake up some morning and discover that the vision had vanished.

Time was needed to accustom them to the possession of wealth, and to produce the conviction that it was substantial and permanent.

While they were thus reveling in luxury, or by slow degrees learning how to revel, what had become of the friend and comrade of their days of poverty, George Winck Warner, who preferred to be known as Winck, but was usually styled George, in spite of his wishes!

By distance, as well as by position, he was far from the Hestons, lodging on the east side of the city, near the machine shop in which he worked, and assiduously using his spare time to perfect his inventions and bring them to notice.

To his room one evening, as he was working at some drawings, there came a visitor, a fine-looking young man a few years older than Warner, Charles Carruthers by name, and a lawyer by profession.

These two were great friends, judging by the warmth with which they greeted each other.

Carruthers helped himself to a seat, and they conversed freely about the inventions and various other matters before a more intimate chord was touched.

"That is a piece of great good fortune that has befallen your friends of Rivington street," remarked the lawyer.

"Yes, and I am very glad of it, for the sake of Lucy Mandely—Lucy Heston, I should say, as that seems to be her right name."

"It was a very strange and romantic affair."

"Especially as it happened just when it did. I had visited them that evening, and I left them, it seems, just before the long-lost husband and father arrived. While I was there Miss Mandely—Heston, I should say—wished that she had a rich father, and within half an hour her wish was granted. The lightning struck in the right place for once, as it was a shame that such a splendid girl should be condemned to poverty and drudgery. However, I would not have left her there much longer."

Carruthers looked at his friend curiously, as if wondering whether he really meant what he said.

"You were nearly as poor as they were," he suggested.

"Well, do you suppose I was going to stay poor? Not I."

"They don't need anybody's help now, George, as they are both independently rich. I have been acting as attorney for the long-lost husband and father, and I attended to the business that settled a fair-sized fortune upon each of them, and I assure you that it is all square and solid. That puts them quite out of your reach, my boy. I suppose you have not been to see them in their prosperity."

"Not yet. They are rather out of my latitude, I admit; but I expect to call on them when I think it proper to do so."

"Proper? Ah! that's the point. Your sense of propriety may keep you away from them, and in the mean time they may forget you."

"There is one of them who won't, and that is Lucy—Miss Heston, I mean."

"Are you very fond of her, George?"

"Fond is no word for it. She is the one person in the world to me, and all the rest are mere side issues, as Mulberry Sellers says. Without her there is nothing; with her there is everything."

"Such a sudden and great change is likely to change her in other respects."

"I have no fear of that. If she had once told me that she loved me, and I should be assured that she favored some other man, and should be made to see the proof of it, I would disbelieve the evidence of my own senses. Perfect love is perfect faith."

"If she has never told you that she loved you, what have you to build on?"

"The fact of my love for her. It is such an absolute thing, as I may say, that it does not exist for nothing. I have not needed to ask and be answered, to make sure of the ground I stand on. She has been thinking of me to-day, and I am likely to have the proof of it before long."

"How do you know that?"

"I can't explain to you how I know it; but I do know it. If I have my mind on you, I know before you speak what you are going to say."

"You are a queer fellow, George Warner. If I did not know you as well as I do, I would set you down either as a crank, or as a very conceited young man. But I am sure that you are nothing of the kind."

"Thank you for your good opinion. By the way, Charley, speaking of wealth, it would not be a bit surprising, now, if my rich uncle, George Winck, should turn up suddenly and make me wealthy."

"I should say that it would be quite surprising!"

"Not more so than what happened to the Mandelys—Hestons, I mean."

"Such a stroke of fortune occurs but once in a great while."

"You are too skeptical, Charley Carruthers. There is no telling what may happen in the age and the country that we live in. One day we are down, and the next day we are up. My uncle, George Winck, was a rich man when he left here, and had said that I was to be his heir. Fortunately for me, I never banked on that; but it would be a big lift for me if he should turn up about now."

"That is idle talk, George. The chances are that he died long ago."

"I suppose so, or he may be in the depths of poverty now. One day we are up, and the next day we are down. If he is living, he has probably forgotten me. I was but a little fellow when I last saw him, and I would not know him if I should see him."

Just then there were steps on the stair, followed by a knock at the door.

"Come in!" said Warner, and in walked, not the man of whom he had been speaking, but Mr. Thomas Heston, considerably to the astonishment of Carruthers.

George Warner was not at all surprised, as he had never met the long-lost husband and father, and his visitor was a stranger to him.

"Ah, Carruthers," said Mr. Heston, "I am glad to find you here, as I can ask you to make me acquainted in proper style with this young gentleman."

Warner's friend duly performed the introduction, and took his hat to go.

"I wish you would stay, Carruthers," observed the visitor. "As I am here on business, you may be useful as a witness, if not in a legal way, before I am through."

This was a rather unpromising opening, and George Warner, who was perhaps unable to read everybody's thoughts, showed that he wondered what the business might be.

"It is no harm, I hope," resumed the visitor. "I understand, Mr. Warner, that you are an inventor."

"I have tried to do something in that line," answered George, the expression of whose countenance showed a feeling of relief.

"You have invented, I believe, a new style of engine and boiler for steam vessels."

"A new style of boiler, sir, and what I hope is an improvement on the latest style of engine."

"That is what I want to get hold of. I also understand that you want a chance to try your inventions, and perhaps I can give you that chance. I am having a steam yacht built. It is to be small, and I want it to be swift. In fact, my object in building it is to beat everything afloat, and I won't be satisfied with anything less than that. The hull suits me exactly, and now I want some lightning machinery, and that's why I have come to you."

"I am thankful for the chance you offer me, Mr. Heston," answered Warner, "and will do my best to make the most of it; but I would advise you to try the boiler to begin with, and be content with that as a first experiment."

"Why so?"

"Because I bank heavier on the boiler than I do on the engine, and because I am still working on the engine and am not yet entirely satisfied with it, and because I suppose you will be in a hurry."

"Well, yes; but I want a fast boat."

"It would take a long time to build any size of an engine on my plans, and the boiler can be put in quickly. My guarantee is worth nothing of course; but I am sure that any engine with my boiler would drive your boat four miles an hour faster than it could be driven by the same engine with another boiler."

"Four miles an hour! That's a big difference. Well, Mr. Warner, I will tell you what I will do with you. I will give you the job of putting the machinery in the yacht, and will bind you to nothing except that you are to do your best and finish it as soon as you can. I don't see that we need any contract. Mr. Carruthers can answer for you, and I think he can also answer for me."

"I shall be glad to answer for both of you," responded the lawyer.

"Very well. You will get my checks and look after the payments. No expense is to be spared that is necessary to do what I want done. So that is settled, and I will leave you two to arrange the details."

"One moment, if you please," said Warner.

"Well, what is it now?"

"I suppose, Mr. Heston, that somebody has recommended me to you."

"My daughter asked me to try you, when I was speaking of the yacht to her to-day. Not that she is an authority in such matters; but it seems that she is an old friend of yours, and has taken a great interest in your inventions."

"Thank you, sir, and I would like to send my thanks to her for her remembrance of me."

"All right. Good-evening."

Mr. Heston hurried away as if he had no more time to spare, and the two young men sat and looked at each other.

"That is a big chance for you, Geo ge," remarked Carruthers.

"I know it, and I mean to work it for all it is worth."

"Of course you will. You must go to work immediately, and come to me for instructions and cash."

"You will remember that I told you a while ago, Charley, that Miss Heston had been thinking of me to-day, and that I was likely to have the proof of it before long."

"Yes."

"Well, you have seen the proof."

CHAPTER XIII.

A NEST OF HAWKS.

A FLAT on the second floor of a handsome house in Forty-fifth street, the occupants of which—that is, of the flat—were as much at home and as independent, if not quite as secluded, as if they lived in a house of their own.

The rooms were expensively furnished, and yet there was about them a tawdriness, a second-hand splendor, a want of harmony—in fact, a general lack of "style"—together with a certain slouchiness in their keeping, that did not certify to high refinement on the part of the occupants.

On the plate over the bell-handle below the name was "Frias," and the dwellers in the flat, besides two female servants, were known to the few who knew them as Maria Frias (styled Mrs.) and Rosa Frias, who was supposed to be the daughter of Mrs. Frias, and was herself unquestionably a miss.

The elder Frias might have been under forty, and might have been over forty, her apparent age varying according to the time of the day and the state of her toilet, and she was a tall and well-developed woman, who had once been handsome, and was still attractive—that is, to those who admired a bold style of beauty with a touch of hardness.

Rosa Frias was a really lovely brunette, who called herself seventeen and looked twenty, with olive cheeks and big black eyes, and a manner that was inclined to be languishing when nothing occurred to excite her passions.

They had but recently come to New York from some locality which they did not name, and their income and manner of living were matters which they kept sedulously to themselves.

Their most frequent visitor—in fact, a very frequent one—was a young man named Manuel del Castro, who was believed to be a Cuban.

There was nothing untidy in the appearance of the apartment, and nothing slouchy in the attire of the ladies, as they sat in their parlor one evening, Mrs. Frias luxuriously inactive, and Rosa fingering the keys of a piano, but without extracting from them any special melody.

"That's him!" exclaimed the elder Frias, as the bell of the flat sounded.

"Who's him?" demanded Rosa, with an equal disregard of grammar.

"Our wealthy young friend, Eugene Coursell. I am so glad that he has come early."

"Yes, there is something in that, as he may be passably sober at this hour; but he is very tiresome, at his best."

"I want you to treat him well, Rosa, as we haven't got all we want out of him yet, and we may make him useful in more ways than one."

"All right; I will play my part like a drum major."

The visitor who was ushered in proved to be the one who was expected.

Eugene Coursell was quite a young man, but his face already showed the ravages of dissipation. It was not a fine face, nor a good one, but in features and expression rather significant. What he lacked in looks, however, was supposed to be made up by his clothes. Though not in evening dress, his garments were costly and in the height of fashion, and he had an air of being proud of their ownership.

It was a good thing, as Rosa had more than once remarked, that he had that to be proud of.

This young man at once made himself at home, and acted as if he considered himself a welcome and valued guest, an impression in which he must have been confirmed by the conduct of the ladies, who made much of him, and treated him with the highest consideration of which they were capable.

He had not been there half an hour when Mrs. Frias cleared off a small table, and laid on it a pack of cards.

"What shall it be this evening, Eugene?" she inquired, in a motherly way. "Shall it be poker, or shall I open a bank against you and Rosa?"

"Thanks, no," answered the young man. "Not any in mine this evening. I have already been cleaned out. I met Del Castro at the club, and he taught me the game of *ecarte*, which was new to me, and of course he got all my spare cash."

A shade of displeasure passed over the face of Mrs. Frias.

"That was wrong of Manuel," she said. "I am afraid that he has been trying to take advantage of you. If he has gone in to play cards for the sake of making money, we must combine against him."

"Oh, he meant no harm," replied Coursell, "and anybody who can get the advantage of me is welcome to it."

Mrs. Frias might have informed him that a young man who has that opinion of himself is always liable to fall into traps; but she refrained from giving him the information.

"As there is no other excitement to be had," said she, "we can have some wine."

This was a proposition which evidently suited Eugene Coursell, and Rosa's big eyes opened wide as she watched his devotion to the bottle, and noted the effect of his potations, which was almost as rapid as that of Cassio in the play.

"Eugene," said Mrs. Frias after a while, "I want to ask you a sort of society question. Do you know anything about those new people on Madison avenue, named Heston?"

"The *nouveaux riches*—the *parvenues*—the people who tumbled from a Rivington street tenement into the lap of luxury? Yes, I know of them, but they haven't the honor of my acquaintance. Of course they are not in society, and it is none of my business to pick them up and patronize them."

"And so you are an aristocrat," observed Rosa, with a suspicion of a sneer. "You will pardon me, Mr. Coursell, but that sounds a little queer. Your aristocracy can't date very far back, as we all know of Coursell's Excelsior Soap, and the sign stares at us from every grocery store."

"Oh, the soap business is quite ancient, Miss Frias. My father inherited it from my grandfather, and of course we have to keep the thing running."

"That will do. If you actually had a grandfather, and have the soap business to show for him, you have a right to call yourself an aristocrat, and to sit down on people who got rich yesterday. There is such a wide difference between yesterday and the day before."

"It seems to me that you are inclined to be sarcastic," observed Coursell.

"Rosa is talking nonsense," broke in Mrs. Frias. "You mustn't mind her jabber, Eugene. I suppose you could pick up those Hestons and make their acquaintance if you wanted to; couldn't you?"

"No doubt of that. They would be glad to get into my set."

"I wish you would, then, for my sake, if not for your own."

"How do you happen to be interested in those people, Mrs. Frias?"

"I have heard of them, and they excite my curiosity. I want to know more about them, and I would not object to making their acquaintance, myself, if you can work me in there after you get the run of the house."

"For your sake, then, I will cultivate those Hestons."

"For your own sake, too, if you will listen to me. There is a real inducement there for a young fellow, Eugene. I understand that Miss Heston is a beautiful girl, and that she is rich in her own right."

"A double inducement, I admit, and I shall surely cultivate Miss Heston."

"She don't drink," suggested Rosa.

"Of course her education has been neglected; but I can do the drinking for both. That reminds me that I have promised to meet some fellows, and I will say good-evening, ladies."

Rosa Frias drew a long breath of relief when Eugene Coursell had left the apartment.

"You drove him away, Rosa," said the elder lady.

"Not I. It was the empty bottle that drove him away. He sucked it dry, and then he slid. That's all."

"You have a way of saying saucy and disagreeable things to him, my dear, as if you want to make him believe that you don't like him."

"Well, I don't like him, and why should I pretend that I do?"

"He is a rich man's son, Rosa, and he would be a good match for such a girl as you."

"I don't think that I should care to marry a whisky barrel, and what would become of Manuel?"

"Leave me alone to manage Manuel. He is devoted to me."

"Did it never occur to you that he might be also devoted to me? I doubt if it would be altogether safe to cross Manuel in what he wants and means to have."

A tapping at the door of the room was recognized as the peculiar knock of Manuel del Castro, who seemed to be such an intimate friend of the Frias family that he carried a pass-key to the general door of the apartment-house.

Manuel del Castro has been spoken of as a young man; but he was by no means a youth, being surely well on the upper side of thirty. He was rather slight, but of what is called a wiry build, with a decidedly dark complexion, raven hair, and the mustache of a brigand. Otherwise his appearance did not differ notably from that of the ordinary every-day man of leisure.

His welcome seemed more a matter of course than that of Eugene Coursell, and yet it was really warmer and more friendly.

"You are just in time, Manuel, to miss the Excelsior Soap man," remarked Rosa.

"It is not long since I saw him, *chiquita*. I had the honor of teaching him *ecarte*, and I won a good stake from him."

"He told us of the game," said Mrs. Frias, "and I think it was very wrong of you to take advantage of him in that way."

"You think that some other way would be the better way? Well, I don't know. I must gather in a few sequins, as well as you."

"It is not that, Manuel. I make no objection to your getting all you can; but you should be careful. We must not give him the impression that we want to rob him, and so run the risk of scaring him off."

"I have been quite tender and considerate with him, I assure you, and I know that I have done nothing to frighten him. But why are you so particular about the fellow? Is he of any use to us, except for the dollars that we may draw from him?"

"Yes. I expect to make him useful, and have already engaged him to serve me. I want him to make the acquaintance of those Hestons, so that I may learn more about them, and perhaps may be introduced among them, myself."

"You do not desire an introduction to the father of the family, I presume."

"Scarcely; but I take a lively interest in his wife and daughter, and in that way the friendship of Eugene Coursell may be of more value to us than many of his dollars."

"So you have set your wise head at work upon that problem, and you want to use Excelsior Soap in washing that linen. Very well. You need only give me a hint, and you shall have all the help I can give you. It goes without saying, I suppose, that this does not interfere with the orders which I had already received."

A heavy frown gathered on the broad brow of Mrs. Frias as she answered, and her speech was bitter and vengeful.

"No, indeed. That blow must be struck. I am afraid that it has been already delayed too long. It must be struck for the sake of vengeance, as well as for what may come after the vengeance. But you must remember, Manuel, that this is not Cuba or Mexico, or even California."

"Precisely so. The methods of one country may not suit another. I understand the meaning of your caution. I know where I am, and what I am to do."

"Do you also know the man?"

"I not only know the man, but have studied his ways."

"Then there will be no more delay."

"No more than is necessary. You may trust to me. Your word is my law."

CHAPTER XIV.

A TRIAL TRIP.

THE trial trip of the Arrow was a great occasion for the Hestons, and especially for the head of the family.

It was also a great occasion for George War-

ner, whose future largely depended upon the success of the experiment.

The yacht was a small but beautiful craft—"a sweet one to look at, and a good one to go." At least it was hoped that that was what she would prove to be.

Her quarters were somewhat cramped, it is true, as it had been the one idea of her owner to attain the greatest possible speed, and everything had been sacrificed to that end; but the cabin room that had been allowed her was comfortably as well as handsomely fitted up.

Everything was to depend upon the performance of the machinery; but on that point both Tom Heston and George Warner felt quite at ease, as they had privately given the Arrow a short trip, to make sure that the engine was in good working order, and that the boiler was in a condition to be a credit to its inventor.

Everything had been hurried to the greatest degree consistent with good work, as Mr. Heston's instructions had been that no expense should be spared to insure the speedy completion of the craft.

He seemed always to labor under the impression that if he was to get any pleasure out of this world, he must seize it immediately.

For the various purposes of the trial trip he had invited several newspaper reporters to accompany him, together with a select party of his personal friends. As he had not yet made many friends in New York, the party was not large enough to crowd the accommodations of the Arrow.

In the party were Abram Coursell, the wealthy manufacturer of excelsior Soap, and his son Eugene—the former being there because Mr. Heston had mentioned the boiler invention to him as a good chance for an investment, and the latter being doubly attracted by the charms of Lucy Heston and the promise of a bountiful "spread." It is due to him to say that he was also obeying the injunctions of Mrs. Frias in cultivating the acquaintance of the Hestons.

George Warner was of course there, not exactly in his working clothes, but by no means in holiday attire, as he was to watch the operations of his boiler, and generally to superintend the machinery which had been put in under his direction.

The Arrow was a fine sight as she slowly moved from her dock out into the East River, and doubtless her beauty was better appreciated by those who watched her from the shore than by those who were on board, as her hull was perfect, cutting the water like a knife, and leaving a clean wake, the only visible sign of rapid motion being the "bone in her mouth," which she carried when under full headway.

She did not carry much of a "bone in her mouth" while she was in sight of those who saw her start, as she slipped along at a leisurely gait among the steam and sail vessels that crowded the East River, and after she had rounded the Battery her speed was but slightly increased until she reached the Palisades.

Then she began to "let herself out."

The superheated steam got its work in, and the screw revolved with great rapidity, and the Arrow shot through the water as her namesake might shoot through the air.

It was the intention to give her a trip of fifty or sixty miles up the Hudson, and she had reached the point from which her performance was to be timed.

Though she shot ahead so swiftly, there was no jarring or rumbling of the machinery, and the tremor of the hull was so slight that her motion was scarcely perceptible to those on board, except as they saw how rapidly she passed stationary objects.

To the engineer in charge, however, the performance of the boiler and engine was very visible, exciting in him feelings of the liveliest apprehension.

As he saw the steam gauge flying around, far past the danger point, he spoke of it to the young inventor, who gave no heed to his warning.

Then he slipped off and hunted up Mr. Heston, whom he found watching an arrangement on the larboard side of the yacht for timing and recording her speed, and noting it with the greatest satisfaction.

"That young boiler man is going to blow up the boat, I am afraid," whispered the engineer, who was unwilling to alarm the passengers.

"Sorry to hear that," answered the owner. "It would be a great pity, as she is going on so nicely. Please ask him to come here as soon as he can spare the time."

Tom Heston continued to watch the log, and the engineer, wondering at the owner's indifference, went back to the engine with his message.

After a while, consulting mainly his own convenience, George Warner left the engine-room, and found Mr. Heston still eagerly watching the log.

"Glad to see you," said that gentleman. "Just look here. This is something wonderful. What time do you think she is making?"

"I should guess it at about twenty miles an hour. That is the speed I have been aiming to get."

"Twenty miles it is. I would like to see anything beat that—except the Mary Powell."

"If I had one of my engines in her, Mr. Heston, and it should work to suit me, I think I could raise the record two miles, if not three."

"The deuce you could! Look here, Carruthers; I want you to have a talk with this young man after we get back, and draw up a partnership contract for building those boilers and engines, I to furnish the money. Draw it up to suit him, and then bring it to me to look over."

"Very well, sir," answered the lawyer.

"By the way, Warner, the engineer came out here a while ago to tell me that he was afraid you were going to blow up the boat. I don't want you to do that, as I can't afford to lose my wife and daughter and the friends who are with me."

"No danger," answered George. "I am not going to blow up the boat this trip, anyhow. The boiler can easily stand all the pressure I have been giving it."

As the young inventor turned to go back to the engine room, he was confronted and accosted by Lucy Heston.

It was the first time he had seen her, except to catch a distant glimpse of her, since that evening in Rivington street, when she had wished for a rich father, and the spectacle fair dazzled and entranced him.

She was radiantly beautiful, and the fine feathers set off the fine bird so perfectly, that for the moment George Warner felt out of place as he stood before her.

"Excuse me," he said as she held out her hand; "but I have been working about the engine, and I mustn't soil your glove."

"You have made a flying machine for us," she remarked.

"I was glad of the chance, and I thank you for giving it to me."

"I did not give it to you. You made it for yourself, and you have well deserved it. Even I can see that the invention is a great success. Why have you kept away from us so long? You did not used to do so."

"There has been a change since then," suggested George.

"Has that kept you away?"

"No, indeed; I am not so weak as that. The truth is that for some time Mr. Heston has kept me so busy with this flying machine, as you call it, that I have not even had time to take the rest I needed."

"You will come to us, then, when you are rested?"

"After this I will be glad to come."

This conversation between Miss Heston and a common-looking man from the engine-room was regarded with eminent disapproval by Eugene Coursell, though he was sober enough to make no attempt to interrupt it.

"Who is that young person to whom you were speaking just now, Miss Heston?" he inquired when the machinist had left her.

"A friend of mine, George Warner by name."

"What is his—ah—specialty?"

"Brains," answered Lucy, and the one word that fell from her lips seemed to weigh a ton.

It was heavy enough to crush Eugene Coursell, who had nothing but the merest commonplaces to utter after that.

He had more to say to his father concerning Lucy Heston than he had to say to her concerning herself, and the substance of their joint ideas was comprised in the close of a private talk they had in the bow of the boat.

"You are right for once, Eugene," said Abram Coursell. "She is the nicest kind of a girl. I like her style, and you shall have my consent if you want to marry her. If such a girl as that would take you in charge, she might make something of you. She has money, too, and that is a strong point in her favor."

"Quite so. Well, sir, as the scheme seems to suit you so well, I will go in for her."

Thus three points were settled by the trial trip of the Arrow. George Warner's boiler was a success, Mr. Heston was to furnish money for the development of the invention, and Eugene Coursell was to marry Lucy Heston.

The first of these points was a sure thing; the second might be regarded as pretty certain, and the third as problematical.

In all respects the trial trip was a success.

Having satisfactorily ascertained the speed the yacht was capable of making, Mr. Heston caused the return trip to be made more leisurely, and the "speed" was eminently agreeable to all the partakers, and Eugene Coursell's desire to stand well in the estimation of Lucy Heston caused him to refrain from deep potations, and the newspaper reporters promised to give the boiler invention the credit it deserved.

When the Arrow turned in to her dock on the East River, and just as she was about to make the landing, Tom Heston, who was standing on the shore side of the yacht, suddenly turned pale and staggered.

"What is the matter, father?" inquired Lucy, who was at his arm.

"A sort of heart trouble, I suppose. I will go and get a glass of wine."

Among the people on the dock were Mrs. Frias and Rosa, with Manuel del Castro; but they had disappeared when Tom Heston returned to his daughter.

CHAPTER XV.

SUDDEN DEATH.

AFTER the successful trial trip of the Arrow, Tom Heston appeared to be more anxious than ever to hurry through life, and none of the various matters that employed his time could be made to move fast enough to suit him.

It seemed as if he wanted to have all creation built on the lines of the Arrow, furnished with George Warner's patent boilers, and run at the highest possible pressure of steam.

He was in such a hurry about everything, indeed, and was always so restless, and at times so wild in his manner, that his friends and family occasionally had doubts of his sanity.

The matter which occupied his immediate and most earnest attention was that concerning which he had spoken to George Warner on the yacht—a partnership for the purpose of developing the young man's inventions, and building his boilers and engines.

In this matter the capitalist was badgered and beleaguered in a manner that put him out of patience.

The bother was not caused by Warner, who was glad enough to agree to anything that would enable him to follow up his recent success, but by Carruthers, who was naturally anxious to promote the interest of his wealthy client, and therefore insisted upon providing safeguards to protect his proposed investment, which required time and inquiry.

These lawyer-like delays displeased Mr. Heston, who protested against them vainly.

"I am sure that there is another fortune for me in that machinery business," said he, "if it is properly pushed. I believe that Warner has plenty of honesty, as well as plenty of brains, and I don't see why it should not be a simple and easy thing to straighten out."

"Easy enough, if we don't care how it is done," answered Carruthers; "but we need to start right, so that it may go easy in the future, and your interest needs to be properly protected for the sake of your heirs."

"Why should we bother about the heirs? Do you suppose that I am going to keel up and die—such a strong and hearty man as I am?"

"I suppose that we are all liable to die any day. If you feel so sure of living, why should you be in such a hurry about this business?"

Tom Heston had to submit to the ways of his lawyer, and it may be said for Carruthers that he was neither dilatory nor unreasonably slow. Within three days after the trial trip, the partnership agreement was put in its complete and final shape, was found to be satisfactory to both the parties in interest, and only needed to be copied in duplicate so that it might be executed.

In the mean time, Tom Heston had been the cause of much uneasiness and anxiety to his wife and daughter.

They had, of course, noticed his restless and flighty ways, and were at times inclined to wonder whether he was altogether right in his head.

He spent but little time at home, and his hours were so irregular that it was impossible even to guess at his comings and goings, and he seemed to be possessed by a demon of hurry that would not allow him to rest.

"I don't see why you need to be always rushing around so frantically," remonstrated his wife. "There is no real cause for it that I can imagine, and it would be a great comfort to us if you would stay at home and rest occasionally."

"Oh, that's a way of mine," he answered. "I got into that habit after my luck struck me, and now I can't quit it."

"I think you might change it if you would try; but you let it grow on you, and you are getting worse every day. What business can it be that keeps you going about at this rate?"

"Business of various kinds, Isabel. I want to get all my affairs straightened up and put in plain and simple shape, as there is no telling what may happen."

"What do you mean?" she anxiously inquired. "Do you anticipate any trouble?"

"I am always anticipating; but there is nothing unusual the matter. If anything should happen to me, I want to be sure to leave you and Lucy comfortable and secure. I owe you every dollar you are likely to get from me, as I neglected you so many years."

"You speak as if you think you may leave us."

"Again I say that there is no telling what may happen, and I want to make things safe. As I told you some time ago, I am liable to turn up missing any day. I am a very uncertain subject, you see, and must be allowed to manage matters in my own way."

There was no doing anything with him, and when he stayed away from home late at night, the two women could do nothing but wonder and worry.

George Warner, believing that the partnership agreement was substantially settled, and that he would be permitted to proceed with the business of developing his inventions on a large scale, hastened to give his time and thought to starting the enterprise, supposing that he would thus not only advance his own interests, but

please the capitalist who was to furnish the money.

This involved the preparation of plans, consultations with architects, machinists, builders and land owners—in fact, an amount of labor that promised to occupy his entire time, and load him down with a heavy responsibility.

He did not shirk anything of this sort, but welcome it, and throw himself into the work with all his youthful vigor and energy.

Late at night, after a long business session with the proprietor of the establishment in which he had learned his trade—a gentleman in whom George believed, and who believed in George—he was returning to his lodging with his mind full of the subjects that had been discussed.

Passing through a street that was always quiet and lonesome at that hour, it occurred to him that the street was even more quiet and lonesome than usual.

No person was visible ahead of him, and he looked behind to see if anybody was in that quarter.

He saw a man there, at the distance of about a block and a half, walking slowly in the same direction which he was taking, and he fancied that he saw in the form and gait of the man a resemblance to Tom Heston.

Realizing at once the extreme improbability of seeing that gentleman in that part of the city at that hour of the night, he dismissed the fancy from his mind, and went on.

Directly he thought that he heard a cry, and he stopped suddenly and looked back.

The man whom he had noticed was lying on his back on the sidewalk, and over him was bending another man, apparently younger and slither than he.

As this was a clear case of robbery, if not of murder, George Warner took instant action.

He shouted "Police!" at the top of his voice, and ran toward the spot.

The upper man, evidently the assailant, hesitated a few seconds, as if engaged in examining the person of his victim, and then jumped up and ran away rapidly, disappearing around the corner of the next block. The man on the sidewalk lay motionless.

George Warner's swift course speedily brought him to the prostrate man, who lay on his back, with one arm bent across his breast and the other straight at his side, his eyes already glazed and set in death.

A dagger in his breast showed the manner in which sudden death had visited him.

Warner uttered a cry of horror and amazement as he recognized the dead man as Tom Heston.

CHAPTER XVI.

SEEKING THE ASSASSIN.

YES, the man on the sidewalk was Tom Heston, and he was already dead, and his death was a clear case of murder; but why and by whom had he been murdered?

It suddenly occurred to George Warner, as he bent over the dead man, that if he should be found in that position he might be suspected of having committed the murder, and it was important to him that the help for which he had called should speedily arrive.

It was also important that he should act so as to disarm any possible suspicion.

"Police!" he shouted again, and the sharp rap of a club greeted him as a blue-coated policeman came hurrying down the street.

"Catch that man!" cried Warner. "He ran around the corner of the block."

"I saw him," answered the guardian of the peace as he hastened in pursuit.

Shortly he came running back, quite out of breath, and declared that the man had got out of his sight, as well as out of his reach.

"What's up?" he inquired. "Why, the man is dead. Who killed him? That feller who ran away?"

"There can be no doubt that the fellow who ran away was the scoundrel who killed him," answered Warner. "I only wish he could have been caught. Perhaps I might have caught him if I had not stopped here."

"I don't know about that. He was a lightning runner. What was the matter? Was there a fight?"

"No fight that I saw. It may have been a case of robbery; I know it was a case of murder."

George Warner briefly and clearly explained his part in the affair, relating what he had seen and done.

"I would have chased the murderer before doing anything else," he said; "but the face of this man struck me as soon as I saw it, and when I had recognized him I could not leave him."

"You know the man, then?" inquired the policeman.

"I know him well. His name is Heston. He is a man of wealth and a particular friend of mine."

"If he was a rich man, it may have been a case of robbery, and I think we had better examine him."

A search disclosed the fact that the dead man's watch and chain had been taken away,

and that there were no papers on his person by which his identity could be established.

There was considerable money, in paper and coin, in one of his trousers pockets; but its presence there might be accounted for by the fact that the assassin had been frightened away before he could finish his work of robbery.

The two searchers thought it best not to interfere with the dagger that had been planted in the dead man's breast; but it was easy to see that it was a weapon of peculiar style and workmanship.

"The street is very quiet to-night," said the policeman. "I will rap for help again; but I must ask you to stay here until I can ring up an ambulance."

Another policeman soon came upon the scene, and then came the ting-tong of an ambulance wagon, and the body of the murdered man was carried to the nearest police station, accompanied by George Warner and the policeman who had first appeared, and at the station a coroner was sent for.

Then there was impressed upon the young man the duty of informing Tom Heston's wife and daughter of his sudden death.

It was an extremely disagreeable task, especially in view of the fact that it would be necessary to arouse them at that very late hour of the night, or early hour of the morning; but it had to be done, and George Warner hastened to Madison avenue for that purpose as soon as he had made the statement required of him at the station-house.

Mrs. Heston and Lucy were naturally shocked by this news, but were not astonished, as the excited manner and strange talk of their husband and father had led them to apprehend his sudden disappearance or some other disaster, and his failure to come home that night had increased the apprehension.

They went to the station-house to view the body, and recognized it as Warner had, though the recognition of the daughter, whose acquaintance with her father was comparatively recent, was not as positive as that of her mother.

There were points about the clothing of the dead man which Lucy did not remember to have noticed in the clothing worn by her father.

The face was the same, smooth-shaven, except the mustache; but there were more gray hairs, Lucy thought, than she had seen in her father's hair and beard.

The murdered man's linen was unmarked, as that of Tom Heston had always been, and there was absolutely no evidence of identity except the face; but that was well-known to his relatives and friends who looked upon it, and Lucy had no doubt that it was her father who lay dead there.

So a permit was given for the removal of the body, and it was properly buried by the family, and the inquest was adjourned from day to day to get evidence that was not forthcoming, and finally the only verdict that could be arrived at was death at the hands of some person or persons unknown.

The murder made a sensation in the newspapers for a few days, and then it was dropped by the detectives and even the reporters as they saw nothing more to be made out of it.

George Warner, however, was not at all disposed to drop it, as he had a well-defined intention of using all the means in his power to bring the murderer of his friend to justice.

He thought he had a clew, too.

Though the dead man's watch was missing, and it was highly probable that important papers had been taken from his person, Warner was convinced that the murder had not been committed for the purpose of robbery—at least, not for robbery alone.

Around the handle of the fatal dagger a ribbon had been carefully wrapped. It had even been stitched, so that it would not be liable to come off.

When this ribbon was unwrapped, there was found upon it the word *Revenge*, neatly worked with silk, evidently by the deft hands of a woman.

The ribbon was blue, and the silk with which the word was worked was orange in color.

The detectives, having a theory of their own, made light of this discovery, and pooh-poohed the ribbon.

It was quite clear, in their opinion, that the murder had been committed for the purpose of robbery, and that the assassin had only been prevented from rifling the pockets of his victim by the approach of George Warner and the alarm he raised.

Thus it was evident that the ribbon with its inscription was intended as a blind, in the hope of putting the police on the wrong track.

Warner did not believe a word of this, and in his mind the only wonder was that the assassin had taken Tom Heston's watch.

It was absurd to suppose that he would leave his dagger in the body of his victim for such an object as was ascribed to him by the detectives, while that was just what he might be expected to do if his motive had really been revenge.

The young man thought that the detectives were fools; but he did not give them a chance to pass the same opinion upon him, as he kept his ideas to himself.

He was strengthened in his belief by the appearance of the dagger, which was of peculiar style and workmanship, and surely was never made in New York, if in any part of the United States.

It was a stiletto, rather than a dagger, and was strongly suggestive of some Italian or Spanish bravo.

Such a person would use such a dagger, and would use it just as this one had been used.

There was another element of mystery connected with this murder.

It appeared that Tom Heston had made a will shortly before his death, giving the "rest and residue" of his property to his wife and daughter, and had named Mr. Coursell, the wealthy soap manufacturer, as his executor.

Thus it became necessary for the executor to find some property to administer on, and he began a search for it.

Not a dollar's worth could be discovered!

The executor in his search had the benefit of the knowledge and aid of Charley Carruthers, who knew of a bank where his late client kept an account, and of several men in Wall and Broad streets with whom he had dealings.

Investigation showed that every stock contract had been closed out, and that the last dollar had been drawn from the bank.

Inquiries were made at all the banks in the city; but nowhere were any funds discovered belonging to the deceased.

This strange and quite unexpected state of affairs necessarily strengthened the theory of the detectives, who again began a search for the murderous robber, proceeding upon the assumption that Tom Heston must have carried a large amount of value upon his person, that the assassin must have been aware of the fact, and had watched and followed him with the view of getting possession of that property by the foulest of foul means.

George Warner proceeded with his search quietly and patiently in another direction, working upon the lines of his own thought.

He had been a great sufferer by the death of his friend, as the large and elegant air castle which he had lately erected was completely overthrown.

Though the partnership papers for the boiler and engine business had been fully prepared, they had not been executed at the time of Tom Heston's death, and all the plans and calculations and hopes and prospects came to a sudden end.

Even if that agreement had been in existence, the funds that were to have been provided for the enterprise had disappeared.

Therefore George Warner was justified in hunting down the assassin of his friend as a personal enemy.

As he reasoned the matter, Tom Heston must have had enmities during his life in California, and if something could be learned of that life, perhaps a clew might be found that would lead to the detection of the murderer.

But it seemed a hopeless task to endeavor to learn anything about Tom Heston's life in California.

CHAPTER XVII.

STRANGE DEVELOPMENTS.

ABOUT this time, while George Warner was prosecuting his search with indifferent prospects of success, he received a surprise which set his thoughts to traveling in a new direction, but without causing him to abandon the object to which he had devoted himself.

The surprise came in the form of a letter from California, and it was by the merest chance that the young man received it.

Waiting for a friend in the eastern corridor of the General Post Office, he happened to look at a list of advertised letters to pass the time, and there he saw his own name.

He had some difficulty in getting the letter; but all this was nothing to the developments that awaited him when he read it.

As soon as he saw the post-mark, he conjectured that the contents must give him some news of his missing uncle, George Winck, and that is just what he found in there.

The letter was written by Andrew Gartney of Glengartney, and the writer was anxious that George Warner should inform him what had become of Mr. George Winck, who had left the neighborhood of Glengartney more than a month before the date of the letter.

"He started for New York," wrote the Scotchman, "to hunt for you, his nephew, whom he had not seen in many years, and whom he had intended to make his heir. As he promised to write to me immediately upon his arrival, and as I have not heard a word from him, I am afraid that he may have been seized by a recurrence of his old trouble, the nature of which I must explain to you."

Andrew Gartney proceeded to relate that a few years previously Mr. Winck was traveling by stage in the vicinity of Glengartney with a considerable amount of mining stock upon his person—stock which shortly afterward became immensely valuable.

The stage was "held up" by robbers, and Mr. Winck was despoiled of his possessions; but that was by no means the worst of the calamity.

He was struck down by the man who robbed him, and was left senseless on the ground, and when he recovered his consciousness it was discovered that his mind was a blank—in fact, he was an utter imbecile.

His friends were found out and communicated with, and he was taken to an asylum for the insane, where he was skillfully treated, and an operation was performed, which finally resulted, as it appeared, in his complete recovery.

On his recovery his memory was so far restored to him that he recalled the numbers of the stock certificates that were taken from him; but they had gone into the whirlpool of the market, and there was no such thing as tracing them or the man who dropped them there.

Mr. Gartney went on to say that he also had the number of the certificates, though that appeared to be no longer a matter of any consequence.

Mr. Winck still had a large amount of property, which had been cared for by his friends, and it had not suffered materially during his absence from the business world.

He got this together when he came out of the asylum, and put it in proper shape, after which he went East with the avowed intention of looking up his nephew, George Winck Warren.

"As your uncle and I had become great friends," wrote Andrew Gartney, "and as we were jointly interested in an important business operation, he promised me that I should hear from him as soon as he reached New York. As I said, I have had no word from him, and I fear that his head may have given way, or that some serious accident has befallen him. I want you to telegraph me as soon as you receive this, telling me whether you have any news of your uncle. If not, you must start a search, and I will forward funds for the purpose."

This information was distressing as well as surprising to George Warner, and for a little while he was quite upset by it.

However, immediate action was necessary, and he roused himself and took the proper steps promptly.

He telegraphed to Andrew Gartney, saying that he had no news of his uncle, and that he would start a search at once.

He also wrote to the Scotchman, explaining the cause of his delay in answering the letter, speaking of his lack of information generally, and requesting that a photograph of Mr. Winck should be sent to him, if procurable, together with the numbers of the stolen stock certificates.

Why he made the last-named request he did not know, unless he considered it a businesslike thing to do.

He was naturally inclined to believe that the suggestion made by Andrew Gartney afforded the solution of the mystery, and that Mr. Winck, overcome by a recurrence of the trouble that landed him in the insane asylum, had become a wanderer, or possible the victim of a fatal accident.

In that event it was quite likely that he had never reached New York, and he might then be an inmate of some unknown asylum in the interior.

Andrew Gartney, who had waited a long time for an answer to his letter, was prompt in attending to business as soon as he got something to work on, and George Warner was surprised by the speediness with which he received an answer to his dispatch, telling him to press the search.

At the same time he received from the same source a telegraphic order for a considerable sum of money, which was quite a relief to him, as his slender resources would not bear a heavy strain.

As the first step in the search, he hastened to employ men to examine the registers of the city hotels for the name of George Winck.

About this time, too, there was an extraordinary and astonishing occurrence at the elegant mansion on Madison avenue which was occupied by Mrs. Heston and Lucy.

After the sudden death of her husband, and especially after the discovery of the fact that his money had disappeared with him, Mrs. Heston was seized by the fear of immediate poverty.

"Well, Lucy," she said one day, "if it comes to the worst, I can take boarders."

"Take boarders?" exclaimed the young lady. "What are you talking about, mamma? That is a strange notion for a person who owns such a fine house as this, and who has a good sum of money in the bank. You must remember that I have a good bank account, too. What do you mean by that talk?"

"Why, my dear Lucy, I was afraid that everything had tumbled to pieces, and that we were going to be sunk in the depths of poverty again."

"No fear of that, mamma. We have plenty to live on, and to live in good style, too, if we take proper care of it."

As the question was of taking proper care of it, the advice of George Warner and Charley Carruthers was had, and it was decided that the Madison avenue mansion should be let furnished, and that the money in the bank should be regarded as capital and invested so as to produce an income.

Before these arrangements were completed,

and while Mrs. Heston and Lucy still occupied the house, they had a visit from a person who occupies an important place in this narrative.

That person was Mrs. Frias, and she sent up her card.

"Mrs. Maria Frias," mused Mrs. Heston. "Who can that be, I wonder?"

"Have you forgotten?" replied Lucy. "She is a friend of Eugene Coursell's. He has spoken very highly of her, and has expressed a wish to bring her here informally, so that she might make our acquaintance."

"I suppose we may as well see her," said Mrs. Heston, "though this sort of thing seems to be quite irregular. We can treat her visit as a matter of business, I suppose, rather than a social call."

A business visit it proved to be, and before their visitor left, Mrs. Heston and Lucy had no doubt of the footing she occupied in respect to them.

She sailed into the room in all the glory of the most stylish dress she could procure, frizzed and diamonded to an astonishing extent, and looking very handsome as well as very impressive.

"So glad to meet you and make your acquaintance," said she. "I have heard so much of Mrs. Heston and her charming daughter from our mutual friend, Mr. Coursell, that I have been crazy to know you. So I took the liberty at last of calling on you uninvited, and I do hope that you are not offended."

The tone and style of this very dressy visitor, together with what they justly considered her surpassing impudence, were quite displeasing to Mrs. Heston and Lucy, neither of whom was disposed to cultivate her acquaintance.

"I supposed that you had called on some matter of business," suggested the elder lady, "as it is known that we are not receiving company these days."

"Yes, I was aware of your bereavement."

"A great bereavement."

"The loss of a husband is generally considered a great bereavement; and yet, Mrs. Heston, you had not seen your husband for so many years that he must have dropped out of your list of acquaintances, and since his return it would seem to me that there can hardly have been time enough to renew the old ties before he was taken from you."

Both the words and the tone of Mrs. Frias were repugnant to the mother and daughter, who looked at the speaker as if astonished at her audacity, wondering whether she meant to make a direct attack upon them.

"He was my husband," mildly answered Mrs. Heston, "and I gladly welcomed him when he returned."

"I suppose so, especially as he came bringing his sheaves with him, as Scripture says. Well, Tom Heston had his good points as well as his bad ones, though I must say that when I formed his acquaintance in California the bad points seemed to have got the upper hand of him."

It was coming. There could be no doubt that an attack was intended; but what sort of an attack was it to be?

"Did you know my husband in California?" inquired Mrs. Heston.

"I knew him well. He was engaged with my husband in a business enterprise there, out of which he got all the profits, which were very heavy, while my husband lost his life. The consequence is that he owed—and still owes—me a large amount of money."

"What sort of a business enterprise was that?"

"Robbing a stage."

"Robbing a stage?" exclaimed in one breath the mother and daughter, who were horrified at this direct charge of crime against their husband and father.

"Robbing a stage was what I said," mildly replied Mrs. Frias, "and I think I speak plainly. When Tom Heston came to our house to propose that scheme to my husband he was so poor that the crows would not notice him; but then he caught the flood tide that carried him on to fortune. Of course, ladies, you are anxious to know the particulars of the smart stroke which made Tom Heston a rich man, and I shall take pleasure in giving them to you."

As she was neither invited to proceed nor to refrain, she chose to proceed.

"When Tom Heston came to our house to propose that scheme to my husband," repeated Mrs. Frias, "he was so poor that the crows wouldn't look at him; but then he caught the flood tide that carried him on to fortune."

"He knew of a traveler by the coming stage who carried a pile of valuable mining-stock, and his proposition was that he and my husband should stop the stage, rob the man, and divide the plunder."

"He even had the numbers of the certificates of stock which the man carried, and he gave me those figures, and I kept them, so that I was afterward able to learn the value of the stock."

"The plan was carried out; the stage was stopped, and the man was robbed; but the proceedings were interrupted by the arrival of a party of neighbors, who made an attack upon the business partners."

"My husband was fatally wounded and got home just in time to die in my arms; but Tom

Heston escaped safely with all the plunder, and never came near me to make the promised divide.

"That stock immediately began to rise in the market, soon reaching fabulous figures, and Tom Heston was a rich man. Of course he largely increased his wealth by fortunate speculations; but that stock was the foundation of it all, and half of that belonged to me as the representative of my dead husband."

"That is the story, ladies, and I hope I have satisfied your curiosity."

"It is monstrous; it is incredible!" exclaimed Mrs. Heston.

"It may seem so to you, who know so little of the ways of the world; but it is absolutely true, and the facts I have given you can be easily proved."

"Why have you brought that story to us? Is there anything that you expect us to do?"

"Oh, yes; that is what I am here for. It is a very simple matter. Tom Heston was a rich man, and I suppose that you have come into his property. As I told you, I have learned the value of that stock when he acquired it and when he probably sold it. I will give you the figures, and shall expect you to pay me my half of the profits of that business enterprise. I shall make no claim on what Mr. Heston may have gained by using the partnership property, and in that I think I am very liberal."

"Supposing this story to be entirely true," said Mrs. Heston, "I cannot see how I and my daughter are bound to take any notice of it!"

"Perhaps you are not—not legally bound, at least. No more was he, as I know that the courts have ideas of their own about such business transactions. Perhaps, too, it would please you to have the story published as I have told it, and that would suit you better than to do the fair thing, and give me what belongs to me."

"You must let us have time to think of this, Mrs. Frias. I must confess that your statements have nearly stunned me."

"Any reasonable amount of time, but not too much. Good-evening, ladies."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TELL-TALE RIBBON.

SUCH was the story that Mrs. Heston and Lucy told to their stanch friend, George Warner, whom they sent for as soon as possible after the visit of Mrs. Frias.

They gave it to him just as they had received it from the woman from California, without endeavoring to extenuate anything or to slur over any of the hard-featured facts.

George Warner was astonished, and there was more than one reason for his astonishment.

He was, indeed, quite bewildered for the moment, and felt that it was necessary for him to be careful how he spoke and acted.

"It is very strange," he said. "The story reminds me of a similar one which was lately reported to me, its scene being also in California. But that is of no interest to you, and this is a matter which requires careful consideration."

"Do you suppose the story can possibly be true?" demanded Mrs. Heston.

"Possibly, yes. No doubt there is more than one California fortune whose origin it would not do to inquire into too closely."

"Then my husband was not only a criminal, but a criminal who robbed the widow of his dead comrade, and all we have is the result of the meanest crime. It is too shameful to believe!"

"We are not going to believe it unless we should be compelled to; but you know nothing of Mr. Heston's life in California during many years, except that he told you that he was for a long time very poor, unable to make any way in the world, and that he finally struck a streak of luck, and suddenly became wealthy. This woman pretends to tell you what that streak of luck was, and it will be necessary to examine her story and learn whether she can produce any proofs. But I will suppose for the moment that the story is true. In that event, would you be willing to have it published, or would you prefer to pay for keeping it quiet?"

"Would she dare to publish it?" inquired Mrs. Heston.

"I have no doubt that she would. There are blackmail and libel laws; but smart people can evade them, and I judge that woman to be one of the smart people. It is pretty certain, too, that she would have no scruples about exposing her own husband's share in what she calls the business transaction."

"If there is anything to be paid," suggested Lucy, "I would rather try to make restitution to the man who was robbed."

"But we don't know who he was, you see, and the chances are that we would never be able to find out—supposing that there ever was any such man. The point to be now considered is whether it is going to be necessary or advisable to buy off this woman, and her story must be inquired into closely before that point can be settled. I think you had better let me attend to the matter."

"What will you do, George?"

"I will require the woman to produce proof of her story, and it will have to be pretty plain and strong to convince me. If she can't furnish the proof, or if it is too weak to be seriously considered, I shall threaten her with the law."

"Suppose she can prove her story?"

"That would open up another branch of the subject, which we won't go into unless we are obliged to."

George Warner received permission to act as an emissary and carry out his ideas, and he lost no time in visiting the camp of the enemy.

His name was enough to secure him a favorable reception there, as he was known to Mrs. Frias in connection with the trial trip of the Arrow, and as a friend of the Hestons.

Mrs. Frias introduced him to Rosa as her daughter, and there was another person there, who was named to him as Manuel del Castro.

This swarthy, black-haired and black-mustached young man, with his decidedly Spanish air and bearing, at once attracted the keenest attention of the young inventor, who could hardly help staring at him.

"If Mr. Heston was killed by some bravo for revenge," he thought, "that is just the kind of man who might have done the deed."

It was soon evident, too, that the Spaniard was on intimate terms with the people who had cause to hate the man who was dead.

"You and Rosa may go out and take a walk, Manuel," said Mrs. Frias, "as I fancy that I will have some private matters to discuss with this gentleman."

George Warner noted the Spaniard narrowly, watching him until he was out of the door with the young lady.

"He and my daughter are engaged to be married," said Mrs. Frias. "So I let them run about together pretty much as they please. Now, Mr. Warner, as I know you to be a friend of the Heston family, I suppose I may regard this as a business visit."

"Something of that nature. I have called, with Mrs. Heston's permission, to inquire further concerning that very strange story which you lately told her."

"There is nothing more to tell, Mr. Warner. I gave her all the particulars of the business, though I did not waste any words in doing so. You say that it is a strange story—do you consider it too strange to be true?"

"By no means. I remarked to Mrs. Heston that such events were possible. But there are many things that are not only possible, or even probable, but that have actually happened, that are not susceptible of proof."

"I informed Mrs. Heston that the statements I made to her could be easily proved."

"Will you kindly indicate the nature of the proof?"

"I was present when Tom Heston proposed to my husband to rob the stage, and when they went away together for that purpose. It was me to whom he gave the numbers of the certificates of stock which he expected to get, and I kept them for the purpose of seeing that my husband got a fair divide."

"Will you let me see those numbers?"

Mrs. Frias was willing, and showed her visitor a somewhat dingy piece of paper, on which were a number of figures in ink.

"These are Mr. Heston's figures, I presume," observed Warner.

"I did not see him make them; but I have no doubt that they are his."

"May I take a copy of them?"

"I don't know why you should want to do that; but you may."

"The fact is, Mrs. Frias, that if we come to a settlement of this matter on a money basis, it will be necessary to consult the executor of Mr. Heston's will, and I shall want to make all the points as clear to him as possible."

The young man copied the figures in his note-book, and returned the paper to its owner.

"I suppose you have other evidence, Mrs. Frias," he observed. "You must be aware that the testimony of one witness, and an interested party at that, would hardly be sufficient in law."

"This is not a question of law, and I am of the opinion that my sworn statement would be sufficient for what I propose to do if I should be driven to it. But there are other witnesses in California, and there is one here."

"Who is the witness who is here?"

"Manuel del Castro, whom you have met this evening. He was one of the pursuing party that chased my husband and his partner."

"Did he recognize Mr. Heston as one of the robbers?"

"Oh, yes. He was quite close to him at one time, and he knew him the next time he met him. He took compassion on me at the time, and proved himself a friend in need, whose kindness I can never forget."

Mrs. Frias lied, as there had been no such recognition; but she was doubtless justified in believing that Del Castro would be willing to back up her lie.

"Such evidence as that," said Warner, "is near and to the point, and I judge that nothing further would be required, if your friend is willing to make oath to that state of facts."

"Of course he will, and to more than that. He met Tom Heston in San Francisco, and taxed him with the stage robbery, and Heston admitted it."

"But would not come to terms."

"What's that?" sharply demanded Mrs. Frias.

"I was supposing that he had approached Mr. Heston in your interest, and that Mr. Heston, in spite of the admission, had refused to make terms with his partner's widow."

"He ran away—that's what he did."

"Well, Mrs. Frias, I am willing to admit to you that I have reasons of my own for believing the story you have told without any further corroborative evidence. But I must say that there is a serious difficulty in the way of the sort of settlement you propose."

"What is that?"

"Simply a lack of funds."

"I don't see how that can be."

"Mr. Heston left a will and an executor, but no estate."

"No money or anything else?"

"Not a dollar that could be found. It was supposed that he was loaded with valuable securities at the time of his death, and was robbed of them by the man who killed him."

"He wasn't robbed at all."

"Are you sure?"

"From what I have read of the case, I don't believe he was robbed."

"Well, it is a mere matter of guesswork. It is certain that he did not leave a dollar that could be found. He had settled some valuable property on his wife and daughter; but those ladies are not rich, and they could not be expected to pay heavily."

At George Warner's side as he sat there, was a standing work-basket, about as high as his elbow, and the top of it was filled with a miscellaneous mass of spools, scattered thread, embroidery silk, bits of ribbon and other scraps.

As he talked, he toyed occasionally with the scraps in the basket, and finally his eye was caught by something, the sight of which fairly gave him a shock.

It was a bit of blue ribbon on which the beginning of a word had been worked with orange-colored silk, and this is what he read there:

REV

It was in vain that he tried to control or conceal the emotions caused by the discovery.

Such a sudden flush came into his face that Mrs. Frias was startled.

"What is the matter, Mr. Warner?" she anxiously inquired. "Are you sick?"

"A sort of faintness has come over me, but I don't know why. Will you have the kindness to get me a glass of water?"

"Let me bring you some wine."

"I would prefer water."

When she had gone for the water, he possessed himself of the bit of ribbon, and put it in his pocket, and after that he quickly recovered from his faintness.

"I don't want to worry the widow and the orphan," said Mrs. Frias, recurring to the subject under discussion, "and I am willing to make it as easy for them as I can, considering the circumstances; but it is very strange that Tom Heston left no property. I can't understand it at all."

"No more can I, Mrs. Frias. It is quite beyond me. But I trust we may hope that the matter may be satisfactorily arranged, and you had better let me know the extent of your claim. You told Mr. Heston that you had ascertained the value of that stock. Will you give me the figures?"

Mrs. Frias gave her visitor two sets of figures.

One set, as she said, represented the value of the stock at the time of the stage robbery, and the other set represented its value at the probable time of its sale by Tom Heston.

There was a wide difference between the two sets of figures, and the latter set indicated a large amount of money.

"You have been very kind, as well as very straightforward, Mrs. Frias," said Warner, "in giving me the information that I wanted. If you will trust the business in my hands for the present, I will consider it carefully, with the view of effecting an amicable arrangement, and will see you again soon."

Mrs. Frias smiled him out, as the interview had been quite satisfactory to her.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DEAD ALIVE.

GEORGE WARNER was glad to escape from the Frias apartments, where the air seemed close and oppressive to him after his discovery of the telltale ribbon.

That discovery absorbed him entirely, to the exclusion of everything else, even of the strange and astonishing story into which he had been inquiring.

With that matter he believed himself to be able to cope, in whatever shape it should be presented, and it was of importance to him just then only in view of the development that it had led up to.

The ribbon told the story.

It was just such a ribbon as had been wrapped

around the dagger with which Tom Heston was killed, and the letters, as far as they went, were of the same shape and style as the letters on that ribbon, worked with silk of the same color and quality.

There could be no doubt that the lettering on each had been done by the same hand; but there was a malformation of the first letter in the scrap which Warner had found in the work-box, and it seemed that the embroideress, discovering that mistake, had thrown the piece aside to start a fresh inscription.

The natural and inevitable conclusion was that the lettering on the ribbon found on the dagger had been done by some member of the Frias family, and the assassin was Manuel del Castro, whom Warner had already fixed upon in his mind as a person who was capable of committing just such a crime.

Full of the discovery that had overwhelmed him, the young man hastened to the Police Headquarters on Mulberry street, where he made this new development known to those who had charge of the matter of Tom Heston's murder, telling them as much as he chose of the story related by Mrs. Frias.

The detectives, though at first surprised and almost dumfounded, were ready enough to go to work when they were fairly switched off on a new track.

Having a motive to guide them, as well as a clew to work on, and there being one person only at whom suspicion plainly pointed, they took a fresh start, and did some admirable work.

Within a short time, working secretly and quietly, they had drawn around Manuel del Castro such a net of circumstantial evidence as consigned him to the Tombs on a charge of murder.

His arrest shattered the Frias stronghold, and his friends there were so absorbed in his perilous situation, that they could give no thought to the claim which had been brought against the Heston family.

If George Warner had wanted to make a flank attack for the purpose of driving Mrs. Frias from that position, he could not have planned it better than fortune had planned it for him.

While these events were being brought to a culmination, George Warner made some discoveries concerning his own affairs, which were startling if not surprising.

The men whom he had set to work reported that they had found the name of George Winck on the register of a third-class hotel.

He had arrived there two days before Tom Heston was murdered, and had disappeared without paying his bill, leaving only a small amount of baggage.

Having thus settled the point that his uncle had actually arrived in New York, Warner's next move was to cause a search to be made of the hospitals and the institutions for the insane in and about the city; but this search was fruitless.

A photograph of the missing man was needed, and that was not forthcoming yet awhile.

There came, however, a letter from Andrew Gartney, urging a vigorous search for George Winck, and promising to send a photograph if one could be procured.

The letter contained a list of the numbers of which the Scotchman had spoken, and the young man hastened to compare them with those in his note-book which he had copied from the paper shown him by Mrs. Frias.

They were the same, or nearly the same.

"Just as I expected," muttered Warner; "but it is a good thing to be certain. This is a strange world that we live in."

Shortly afterward, and just before the trial of Manuel del Castro, he received another letter from Andrew Gartney, inclosing the promised photograph, for which the writer had been obliged to send to Sacramento.

Charley Carruthers happened to be in Warner's room when this letter came.

As George took out the photograph and looked at it, his countenance was enough to show his surprise, without his exclamation of astonishment.

"What is the matter now?" inquired Carruthers.

"Wonders will never cease. Look at this photograph, Charley, and tell me whose it is."

"It is Mr. Heston," answered the other, and he chipped in with his astonishment.

"That is what I take it to be, and yet it was sent to me as a likeness of my uncle, George Winck."

"It is Mr. Heston," insisted Carruthers. "There are points of non-resemblance, but nothing more than might be expected, as a photograph is seldom quite reliable."

"That is too much for me, Charley. I can't make it out at all. Was Mr. Heston my uncle Winck, and does that account for the interest he took in me? If so, why should he be passing under another name, and why should he not have made himself known to me?"

"It is a mysterious affair all around," observed Carruthers.

"And this photograph tops off the mystery. I have reasons for believing that Mr. Heston and my uncle Winck could not have been the

same person, and yet this picture declares pretty positively that they were."

The two friends agreed to treat the matter as a conundrum for whose solution they must trust to time.

The trial of Manuel del Castro was hurried forward at an unusually rapid rate, and he was brought to the bar of the Oyer and Terminer, charged with the murder of Thomas Heston.

The best criminal lawyer in the city was employed to conduct his defense; but he had no other friends in the court room to stand by him and sympathize with him.

It had been intimated to Mrs. Frias that unless she took heed to her ways, she and her daughter were liable to be indicted as accessories before the fact in connection with that murder, and they thought it best to keep themselves in strict seclusion for a while.

The network of circumstantial evidence that was woven about the accused was something wonderful in its extent and completeness.

The police authorities had taken hold of the matter in earnest when they were furnished with the proper clues, and it was said at Headquarters that they had seldom worked up a case more satisfactorily.

This evidence was presented methodically and in the most convincing style by the district attorney, and when it was all in, it seemed that there could be no doubt of the prisoner's guilt.

His counsel felt the pressure of this opinion, and when he arose to open the defense it was clear that he had an up-hill road to travel.

He was not compelled to travel it far.

Hardly had he begun his remarks, when there was a stir in the court room, and a man forced his way through the crowd into the space near the judge and the jury.

If a bombshell had dropped among them, it could scarcely have produced a more astonishing effect.

"Mr. Heston!" exclaimed George Warner, jumping up and grasping the hand of the ex-dead man.

It was, indeed, Tom Heston, looking just as he had looked when last seen by his friends there, except for an increased uncertainty of expression and flightiness of manner, which might have been noticed by a close observer.

Upon no person did his appearance produce a greater effect than upon the prisoner, whose swarthy face turned ashy pale, and his dark eyes dilated as he stared at the man who must have risen from the dead.

George Warner introduced Tom Heston to the district attorney, and Charley Carruthers, who had been assisting in the preparation of the case, also certified to his identity.

There was only one thing left to do.

The judge directed a verdict of acquittal, and the jury, glad to get off, obeyed him instantly.

Mr. Heston was asked for an explanation.

"I don't know that I can explain anything," he answered. "I have been away on business—that is all. When I got back I learned that a man was on trial for murdering me, and I dropped in here to say that I have not been murdered—at least, not yet—nor have I been robbed."

As soon as Manuel del Castro found himself a free man, he took advantage of his freedom to leave the court-room, and it was not until he was out of their grasp that the authorities reflected that he must surely have killed somebody, and that he ought to be held for the murder of that person.

But Manuel del Castro hastened immediately to put a long reach of distance between himself and New York.

He stood not upon the order of his going, but went at once.

CHAPTER XX.

A SUDDEN FLITTING.

As soon as the excitement in the court-room had subsided, George Warner turned around to the ex-dead man.

"Have you been home, Mr. Heston?" he inquired.

"Not yet, but I am going there right now. No, thank you, I don't need any company. I would rather go alone. I have some business matters to talk over with my people."

George did not like to be shaken off in that way; but he could not force himself upon Tom Heston, who went direct from the court-room to the Madison avenue mansion.

If his sudden appearance at the trial had caused an excitement, that was nothing to the sensation that ensued upon his arrival at his home.

Mrs. Heston fainted away at the sight of him, and it was all that Lucy could do to bear up and take care of her mother.

The husband and father viewed this performance with impatience which he did not endeavor to conceal, as it interfered with and delayed what he deemed a matter of pressing importance.

When order was restored, Mrs. Heston eagerly questioned her husband, wanting to know where he had been, and why he had left them so suddenly without any notice.

"Oh, that's all right," he answered. "You know I told you that I was not to be relied on

to stay in one place for any length of time, and that I might drop out at any moment. I had a sudden business call, and have been across the water."

"It is all so strange, and so much has happened since you went away. A man has been arrested, and is to be tried for your murder."

"I know it; but I have stopped that. They were trying him to-day, and I stepped in to show them that I was alive, and they let him go."

"We have heard the strangest and most terrible story about you, which has greatly troubled us both."

"What is that?"

"I am ashamed and afraid to repeat it to you."

"Oh, shoot it off. I'm no chicken, and I always want to hear the worst of everything."

Mrs. Heston, with a painful effort, rehearsed the tale that had been told her by Mrs. Frias.

During the recital, her husband became visibly excited, frowning heavily, and walking the floor after the manner of a crazed wild beast.

"It is a lie," he said, "purely and simply a lie. I know the woman who told it, and met her in California. She is an adventuress, and her purpose was blackmail of the meanest kind, coming here to worry the wits out of you when I was supposed to be dead. But I thought that you had friends enough here to protect you from that sort of thing."

"George Warner went to see her, and he must have frightened her, as we have heard nothing more from her since she called here."

"That is a very bright young man—as good as gold and as true as steel. I must keep my word and do something for him. Of course, he could be depended on to do the right thing. Why, Isabel, if that story was true, and could be proved, do you suppose that I would be here now, or that I could ever have come back to you? My permanent address would be the State Prison at San Quentin."

"I did not believe the story," said Mrs. Heston.

"That is right; but I will tell you what you may believe. I have enemies, and deadly enemies at that, and I am afraid of them—not really afraid, you understand, but don't want to run any risks, for your sake and Lucy's. It was to avoid them that I disappeared, and that man, whoever he was, who was killed by that scoundrel, received by mistake the blow that was meant for me. I must avoid them once more by disappearing again."

"Please do not leave us again," implored his wife.

"I don't want to leave you. You may go with me if you will, and I wish you would, as I sometimes fancy that I am not quite right in my head."

"Where thou goest I will go," quoted Mrs. Heston. "Do you want to go abroad again?"

"No; I will go straight to California. I can defy the scoundrels there, better than here, and they will be smart if they get the drop on me. I will go direct to the place where that woman located her lie. I have some friends there who will be glad to see me, and with whom I have some business transactions to close up. But, Isabel, if you and Lucy are going with me, you must start at once."

"What will we do with this house?"

"Never mind the house."

"I had already made arrangements for renting it, but they are not completed."

"Complete them, then, and we will start this evening if you can get ready."

"That would be impossible."

"To-morrow, then—not later than that."

"Have you money, then?" inquired Mrs. Heston. "There was none that could be found after you were killed—that is, after you went away."

"I have not lost a dollar. My money is all safe, and there is plenty of it. So there is nothing for you to do but to get ready and go, and there is no time to be lost, if you want me to be as safe as my money is."

George Warner knew nothing of this sudden determination.

He had got it into his head that Tom Heston, since his return, did not care particularly to see him, and he was not inclined to force his society upon anybody.

Besides, he had lately accumulated some thoughts and ideas of his own which, upon mature consideration, caused him to be not over-anxious to associate with Tom Heston.

There was one thing that pressed upon him with terrible force just then, and that was a doubt, almost amounting to a certainty, which must be settled as soon as possible.

Who was the man who had been murdered, and who was buried under the name of Tom Heston?

He sought his friend, Carruthers, and again brought out the photograph which he had received from Andrew Gartney.

"This matter, Charley, is now reduced to simple elements," said he. "This photograph is undoubtedly a portrait of my uncle, George Winck. It is also a portrait of the man I saw murdered, and whom we all supposed to be Mr. Heston. As it is now settled that he was not

Mr. Heston, it follows that he must have been my uncle."

"You have stated the point very clearly and logically," answered Carruthers, "and there is no escaping your conclusion."

"But I must have the proof, and that point must be settled squarely and legally."

With the aid of Carruthers he procured an order for the disinterment of the body of the murdered man, which was examined in the presence of witnesses, and affidavits were prepared and executed, certifying to its identity with the photograph that had been sent from California.

Considerable time was required for these proceedings, and when they were finished, George Warner felt that duty as well as inclination required him to call on Lucy Heston and her mother.

He found the Madison avenue mansion closed, with no visible sign of occupancy.

Mrs. Dall, however, who was in charge, came to the door, and informed him that the house had been rented with its furniture, and that the family had left the city.

She did not know what had become of them, as they had not seen fit to inform her on that point; but she knew that they had gone West, and had reason to suppose that California was their destination.

The young man was somewhat stupefied by this development, but not really surprised.

He naturally connected this sudden flitting with the story that Maria Frias had told, and the threats she had made, which Mrs. Heston had of course made known to her husband.

It might also be connected with the recent murder, as there could scarcely be a doubt that, owing to the extraordinary resemblance between the two men, the assassin of George Winck had mistaken him for Tom Heston.

It was, indeed, a strange fate which had bound together the lives of these two men, so that one of them should become the victim of the other, and finally perish in his stead, and so that the nephew and heir of the dead man should be inextricably mixed in the same entanglement.

But George Warner wondered why they had gone away without giving such a faithful friend as he had been the slightest intimation of their purpose, and he could only charge this failure to the eccentricity or ill-will of Tom Heston.

He went to the office of Charley Carruthers, to see whether any information was to be had there, and he got some that greatly surprised him.

Tom Heston had executed the articles of partnership which had been prepared just before his supposed death, and had left a considerable sum of money in the hands of Carruthers to carry out his share of the agreement.

If this piece of good fortune had befallen him some time previously, George Warner would have been overjoyed, as he might have gratified the second best wish of his life; but since then there had been developments which, if they were as true as they looked to be, rendered it impossible for George Warner to accept any benefit at the hands of Tom Heston.

He was Lucy's father, and that saved him from any terrors of the law; but Warner could not touch his money.

Besides, it had become necessary for him to go to California, to prove the death of George Winck and settle up his estate.

He explained to Carruthers as much of these matters as he chose to, and the lawyer gave him all the assistance in his power toward carrying out his intention.

At his lodgings he found a letter from Lucy awaiting him in which she explained the cause and manner of the sudden departure of the Heston family, and revealed their destination.

"Why, that is the very place I am bound for," said he, and he hastened to start for California, after telegraphing to Andrew Gartney.

CHAPTER XXI.

TRIALS OF A TENDERFOOT.

GLENGARTNEY had changed greatly since George Winck was brought there, an apparently hopeless imbecile, after the calamity of the stage robbery.

It had come to be, as its shrewd proprietor had supposed would be the case when he located the camp, a town of some consequence on an important line of railroad, and for a time had been the terminus when the road was being constructed.

This condition of affairs brought rapid growth to Glengartney; but it also brought some of the concomitants of rapid growth that were not altogether agreeable to Andrew Gartney.

Liquor saloons increased and multiplied, and with them there sprang up a large crop of gambling houses and dance halls, with all their attendant evils.

These things shocked the canny Scotchman, and irritated him almost beyond endurance, but there was no way of preventing them, as he could neither stop the influx of rough citizens, nor get rid of them after they had located.

After a hot controversy, in which he gained

nothing but ill will, he finally effected a compromise with the rough element, by which no women were to be permitted to have anything to do with the sale of liquor, and with that he was obliged to be content.

When the terminus of the road was moved further on, a number of the objectionable establishments went with it; but more than enough were left to supply the wants of Glengartney and its neighborhood.

Among the rough citizens who felt themselves compelled to follow the course of empire by keeping up with the railroad was the proprietor of the Empire Saloon, one of the showiest places in Glengartney.

When he had made up his mind to go, he was puzzled as to what he should do with his property; but at the nick of time there stepped in a man who had just arrived from the East, and who was not unknown in Glengartney, and his name was Manuel del Castro.

He promptly took a lease of the Empire, on terms that he found highly satisfactory to himself, and in his hands it lost none of its former attractiveness and popularity.

On the first floor the bar was maintained in all its pristine splendor, with a few tables for the accommodation of short card players; but the most important part of the establishment was on the second floor, where faro and roulette held sway, and were highly remunerative to the proprietor.

Though Del Castro supervised the entire business of the Empire, and was never out of the way when there was a chance for a game with money in it, the gambling department was presided over by a handsome and stylish woman known as Mrs. Frias, who was occasionally assisted by her yet more handsome and attractive daughter, known as Rosa Frias.

There could be no doubt that a great part of the popularity which had accrued to the Empire was due to the women, and there were those who considered it positively a privilege to be allowed to lose their money in such charming company.

Shortly after the new proprietor had taken possession, and just as the flood tide of a fresh prosperity was setting in strongly, there straggled into the Empire a young man who was widely different in appearance from the usual *habitués* of such resorts in Glengartney.

He was a slim specimen of male mankind, and would have been known for a tenderfoot or fresh arrival as far as he could be seen, being arrayed in new garments of the ultra English style, such as were fancied by a portion of the gilded youth of New York.

He had a decidedly dissipated look, too, and had evidently been imbibing pretty heavily before he struck the Empire.

This young man walked in leisurely, and took his stand at the front of the saloon, at a little distance from the bar, gazing with wondering eyes at a scene which had for him the charm of novelty.

Business had fairly set in for the night, and the bar-room was pretty well filled with a mixed assortment of humanity, most of them of the roughest varieties, to judge by their personal appearance, though it was well known that the best clothes did not always cover the most decent men, and in such places as the Empire there was strict equality between the capitalist and the wage laborer.

Some of them were seated at the card tables, and others were sauntering about, conversing or looking on; but most of them were busily engaged at the bar, filling themselves with liquor of a quality which caused them to appropriately give it the pet names of "p'ison," "tanglefoot," "tarantula juice," "sure death," "coffin nails," etc.

The hour was as yet too early for striking scenes of hilarity and "ruction;" but here and there was a tough citizen or a foolish one, who seemed to be bent upon destroying the greatest possible amount of whisky in the shortest possible space of time.

Among them was a prospector who had just come in from the hills, had disposed of a modest claim for a modest sum, and could not be satisfied until he had distributed his money among the saloons and other attractions of Glengartney.

In his garb and general appearance he was cut out for the character of a wild man of the woods, his untrimmed hair flowing over his shoulders, his uncut beard spreading down upon his breast, and his rough clothing tattered and soiled by severe experience in the wilderness.

The presence of money in his pocket ought to have induced him to endeavor to assume the style of a civilized human being, at least in his apparel; but he had not yet found time for any such foolishness as that.

This individual, having got into the full swing of a royal whoop-em-up, espied the dandified stranger, and settled upon him as a victim that had been providentially sent to him to fill the measure of his joy.

To put a tenderfoot through a course of sprouts, and to enlighten him as to the ways of the Wild Western world, was just then the height of the prospector's ambition.

As the proposed victim, unconscious of this kind intention, was surveying, somewhat stupidly, the motley scene, a heavy hand was laid on his shoulder, and a hoarse and husky voice murmured at his ear:

"Say, tenderfoot, which 'u'd you rather do, drink or fight?"

The young man looked around at the uncouth and unclean figure of his questioner, and shook the dirty hand from his shoulder, with a look of disgust which did not escape the keen eyes of the other.

"I can't say that I quite take in the meaning of your remark," he answered.

"Don't fling keeless words at a gen'leman when he axes you a civil questchin. I speak plain and straight—which 'u'd you rather do, drink or fight?"

"Well, if it comes to that, I would rather drink, any day in the year."

"Come an' take a drink on me, then."

The big man seized the stranger by the arm with a grasp that was not to be easily shaken off, and towed him up to the bar.

"Look, boys!" said one of a group at the other side of the room. "Big Bill Sammis has got holt of a tenderfoot, an' is goin' fur his toenails. Let's see the fun."

This group, with others equally interested, moved toward the bar, where the big man had planted his victim as if he meant to keep him there.

"Gimme some ile o' vitri'l, barkeep'," ordered Bill Sammis. "W'ot'll you take, tenderfoot?"

"Champagne."

"Sham what? Sham nothin'. Whisky's the drink that goes, an' that's w'ot you're goin' to drink wi' me."

"I never drink whisky," murmured the young man.

"You don't, hey? Then it's time you was gittin' broke in. Gimme that bottle, barkeep'."

Bill Sammis poured a glass full of the decoction that was known as whisky at the Empire, and offered it to his victim.

"This here's w'ot you've got to drink, tenderfoot. Stand up, now, and take your medicine like a man."

"I won't drink that stuff," stubbornly replied the young man.

"D'ye hear that, barkeep'? This here compound extract o' coffin nails he calls stuff. W'ot's to be done wi' sech a chap as that, 'cept to teach him better manners the rough way? D'ye know who ye'r flingin' yer keeless words at, tenderfoot? I'm Bill Sammis, the terror o' Topnotch and the screamin' jayhawk o' Sandy Hill. I've got a private graveyard in every settlement along this range, and the men I've put to rest would stock a public cemetery. Here's yer medicine, young feller, and you've got to take it."

"I tell you I won't drink that stuff."

"You've got to drink it, or die."

"I would be sure to die if I should drink it, and so I will take my chances the other way."

Big Bill Sammis reached for his victim, but the victim stepped back and made a motion to draw a pistol.

The heavy hand came down on his shoulder, nearly crushing him to the floor, and effectually preventing that attempt.

"None o' that, tenderfoot!" sternly ordered the prospector. "Children mustn't meddle with edge tools, and that's another lesson you've got to be taught."

He seized his victim by the back of the neck, with a grip that could be severely tightened in case of resistance, and again offered him the glass of whisky.

"Now, tenderfoot, you've got to swallow this ef I hev to squeeze it down yer throat, and if you spill a drop, I'll give you another dose fur good measure."

"I won't drink it," stoutly insisted the victim.

Bill Sammis tightened his grip on the young man's neck, until his mouth flew open, and he screamed with pain.

The big man was about to pour the liquor into the aperture thus presented to him, when the glass was knocked from his hand, and he was seized by the collar, and violently whirled around.

Relieving his rage with a string of oaths, he looked at his assailant, and found himself confronted by Manuel del Castro.

"You can't play those games here, my friend," quietly remarked the Spaniard.

"What ha' you got to say about it, and who air you, anyhow?" demanded Bill Sammis.

"I am the man who owns this place and runs it. I run it to suit myself, too, and I don't allow my friends to be imposed on."

"You won't run it much longer, you infernal Greaser."

Sammis reached for the revolver that was stuck in his belt, and the Spaniard jerked out a bowie-knife as quick as a flash.

"I don't keer fur yer knife. Here's what'll send you to kingdom come."

Before the big man could cock his pistol, Del Castro had got his work in with the knife, not with the blade but with the haft.

The heavy bone handle struck his antagonist

on the temple, and Bill Sammis went down like a log.

"If that man dies," said the Spaniard, "I call you all to witness that I struck him in self-defense."

CHAPTER XXII.

REVENGE IS WANTED.

BIG BILL SAMMIS was not dead or likely to die.

He had been badly stunned by that knock-down blow; but the universal remedy, whisky, was promptly applied, producing a sneeze and a snort, and the big man gradually gathered himself up and staggered to his feet, his beauty sadly marred by a lump on his forehead that threatened to assume the proportions of a beehive.

"You got the drop on me this time," he muttered as he scowled at Del Castro; "but my turn will come, and I'll get even with you."

Manuel del Castro took no notice of him as he stalked out of the saloon, but turned and extended a hand to his late victim.

"Eugene Coursell, my dear friend, nothing could have surprised me more than to see you here."

"I am glad that you were surprised just in time to save me from that fiend," answered the young stranger.

"So am I. What brought you out here?"

"My governor is a big stockholder in this railroad, and he was sent out as a sort of committee to see how things were working, and he thought he would like to have the pleasure of my company and the benefit of my brains."

"That is to say, he wanted to have you where he could watch you; but I doubt if that will be much of a pleasure to him."

"How long have you been here, Del Castro?"

"Only a little while. I happened to stop here, saw this place for sale at a bargain, and jumped into it. I have already made a fine success of it, too."

"Glad to hear that. What has become of Mrs. Frias and Miss Rosa?"

"They are here."

"In this town? Why, that is just glorious. Where will I find them?"

"Up-stairs. Walk right up, my boy, and make yourself at home. If you want any wine, you can send down for it."

Eugene Coursell, as the only son of a wealthy man, held the enviable position of a pigeon that is worth the plucking; consequently Manuel del Castro, as the proprietor of the Empire, was unfeignedly glad to see him, and was ready to do all in his power to promote his pleasure.

The young gentleman, who had been sobered by his rough experience with Bill Sammis, hastened up-stairs by the route that was pointed out to him, and entered a room which had to him quite a natural and homelike look.

Though it was by no means such an apartment as one might expect to find devoted to gambling purposes in the wild and wayward West, it did not differ much from some of the same sort which young Coursell had inspected somewhat expensively in New York.

It was fitted up after the manner of a parlor, not at all in costly style, and rather scantily, but with curtains and other furnishings which gave it something of the look of a room devoted to home uses as well as to pretty serious business.

The pretty serious business was clearly indicated by a table placed between two of the windows, with a faro lay-out upon it.

Before the table were several men, partly seated and partly standing, evidently absorbed in the game, and behind it was a sedate but vigilant dealer, and a pile of money was visible, and stacks of chips spoke of heavy stakes.

Elsewhere there was a roulette contrivance; but it was not then in operation, the game not having become popular in Glengartney.

A Chinaman with a waiter in his hand stood ready to convey orders and bring refreshments from below, and his meek and placid bearing emphasized the quiet of the place.

The home element was represented by a lady who sat in a corner, with a bit of embroidery in her lap—a lady who was no longer young, but still handsome, stylishly dressed, and with a conspicuous display of diamond ornaments.

Manuel del Castro had used rare good judgment in giving to Mrs. Frias and Rosa the nominal charge of the gambling room.

Both the ladies, particularly the younger one, were vastly attractive to the Glengartney public, and as one of them was nearly always in the room, the roughest of the gamblers were unwilling to raise a row, and those who lost accepted their ill-luck with a good grace.

Perhaps the proprietor did not sell quite as many drinks up there as he might have sold; but the faro-bank had plenty of good customers, and there were scarcely any kickers.

Eugene Coursell went direct to Mrs. Frias, who received him with the greatest cordiality, her greeting having a mixture of joy and surprise.

As soon as the young gentleman had explained how he came to be there, and there had been a little further swapping of information, he called

for Rosa, and Mrs. Frias shortly brought that young lady forth from an adjoining room.

She was looking lovely, and her beauty was enhanced by a blush that mantled her cheek as she met the young gentleman from New York—a blush which he interpreted as highly complimentary to himself.

These three were soon engaged in an animated conversation, which appeared to be highly interesting to themselves.

Some of the players at the faro-table looked around as they envied the dandified young stranger who was being so pleasantly entertained by the divinities of the place; but they were too deeply absorbed in their game to do more than glance occasionally in that direction.

Young Coursell insisted upon ordering some wine, and the services of the Chinaman were brought into requisition, and the tongues of the three were loosened by champagne, and Eugene Coursell became so exuberant in his admiration of Rosa, that Mrs. Frias was obliged to call him to order and start him on another tack.

"It is very strange that I should have happened to come here and meet you here," observed the young man; "but stranger things than that happen, and maybe the strangest of all is something that perhaps you don't know yet."

"What is that?" inquired Mrs. Frias.

"Some friends of ours have lately come out here—friends of mine, I might better say, as I doubt if you made their acquaintance in New York."

"Who are they?"

"The Hestons, the new people who had that fine house on Madison avenue, and in whom you seemed to take such an interest."

Mrs. Frias surely took a decided interest in them at that moment, as her face flushed, and then turned pale, and there was an excitement in her manner which she could not suppress.

"Are they all here?" she eagerly asked.

"All three of them, father, mother and daughter."

"How long have they been here?"

"Only a little while. They got here shortly before my governor and I arrived, as I understand."

"Where are they stopping—at the hotel?"

"No, indeed. They have a better thing than that. They are visiting some friends of the father's, named Kempton, at a place in the hills called Crow Nest. Maybe you know where it is."

"Yes, I know something about it."

If anybody had a right to know something about it, Mrs. Frias had.

"Have you been out there to see them?" she inquired.

"Not yet, but I expect to look them up before long."

"I should think," suggested Rosa, "that you would be anxious to see them, or one of them. As Miss Heston is such a good match, you ought to improve your chance to win her."

"Not while you are alive," quickly answered Eugene, turning upon the young lady a face that glowed with enthusiasm and champagne.

Mrs. Frias hastened to call him off from dangerous ground.

"Do you take any interest in that sort of thing?" she inquired, motioning toward the faro-table.

"Of course I do, here and everywhere; but the fact is, Mrs. Frias, that my governor has put me on short allowance until he sees how I am going to carry myself here, and I must humor him a bit before I can get a good supply of cash. That reminds me that if I am to keep in his good graces, I must show up at the hotel at a reasonably early hour, and must be reasonably sober. So I must say good-night, and I hope you will let me call again."

"Whenever you please," replied Mrs. Frias, and Rosa's smile gave assurance of welcome.

When Eugene Coursell had left the room, the two ladies looked at each other significantly.

"That young man is a great catch," said the elder. "He is the only son of his father, and his father is a millionaire. I believe he would marry you if you wanted him to."

"I believe he would," musingly answered Rosa; "but what would his father say to such a scheme?"

"Everything is forgiven to an only son. It would merely be necessary that the young man should have some backbone, and we could put that into him. I wish you might marry him."

"I need never be afraid of him. But what would we do with Manuel?"

"We should not allow him to stand in the way of such a chance as that."

"And what would Manuel do with us?"

"Ah! that is another question."

The faro-players gradually dropped out, and finally, in the small hours of the morning, the Empire Saloon was closed, and the proprietor came up-stairs to have a quiet smoke before going to bed.

Rosa had already retired, but Mrs. Frias was there to converse with him, and they talked mainly of the unexpected appearance of Eugene Coursell.

"That was a strange happening," said Mrs.

Frias; "but stranger things than that are liable to happen any day. What would you think, now, if you should meet those Hestons here?"

"That is impossible," replied the Spaniard. "Tom Heston would never dare to return so near the scene of that stage robbery."

"You don't seem to know men as well as you think you do, Manuel. Tom Heston is already here with his wife and daughter."

"What! Here in Glengartney?"

"Not exactly in Glengartney, but not far from this sweet spot. He and his family are stopping, of all places in the world, at Eric Kempton's Crow Nest."

"Where did you get this news?"

"From young Coursell."

"Confound him for a bearer of bad tidings! I wish, now, that I was well away from here."

"That is a very foolish wish, my friend. The tidings are anything but bad, and you are just where you ought to be. We will have a chance now to be revenged on that rascal."

"I can't see that I need to be revenged on anybody," grumbled the Spaniard.

"But I must have my revenge. If one scheme won't work, another will. I mean to disgrace that scoundrel and bring him to justice, for the sake of my dead husband, if for no other reason."

"I don't believe your dead husband is worrying about him."

"But I am, and I am bound to have my revenge."

"Please count me out, Maria. It strikes me that I have had quite enough of that."

"Are you going to turn coward?"

"You know that I am not a coward; but I am tired. I have put myself in peril of my life to please you, and I would surely have been compelled to stretch hemp, if it had not been for an accident. If that man had stayed away, as he might well have done, and I could not have blamed him, where would I be now? He came forward to save my life, and I propose to let him alone. Decency is not dead in me, though my ways have been crooked."

"You need not run any sort of a risk," insisted Mrs. Frias, "and there is nothing I want you to do but give me your company, and in that way your support. I mean to go up to the Kempton place, and denounce that rascal, Tom Heston, and tell the story of his crime, and then let him wriggle out of it if he can."

"What is the use, Maria? I can see nothing to be gained by such a course of conduct, and the man is likely to be more than a match for you. Why not let well enough alone? I have got a good opening here, and, with your help, am doing finely. Why should we not both be satisfied?"

"Because I hate that man, and want to get even with him. I mean to do just what I have said I would do, and you must help me."

The influence of Mrs. Frias upon her friend and partner was so strong, that before his cigar was finished he had consented to countenance her plans, if not to aid them.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE GUESTS AT CROW NEST.

CROW NEST had changed, as well as Glengartney, since the troublous times that succeeded the well-remembered stage robbery.

In place of the somewhat temporary structure that had been damaged by fire, a handsome and substantial house had been erected, which exactly suited Eric Kempton and his wife.

A new barn had also been put up, with other useful buildings, and an air of prosperity pervaded the place that looked very much like wealth.

These improvements had been costly, the more so as it was a difficult matter to get the materials to Crow Nest, and, to meet the cost, Eric Kempton had been obliged to put a mortgage on his ranch, which was a drawback, though an invisible one, to the apparent prosperity.

He was, however, an enterprising and active minded young man, who suffered no grass to grow under his feet in matters of business, and he had started two schemes which he expected to lead him well forward on the road to fortune.

One of these was a sawmill, for working up the abundant timber on his land, and the other was a sheep range.

As he had no capital for these enterprises, he had sought a partner, and had found one in Tom Heston, who had furnished the money in consideration of a share in the profits.

The sawmill was paying well, and the sheep range, though a new thing, was promising well, and Kempton was heartily glad when his partner came unexpectedly to pay him a visit.

His pleasure was increased by the fact that Tom Heston was accompanied by his wife and daughter, the isolated position of Crow Nest rendering it a lonely place at the best of times.

Company was always acceptable there, and such company as this was nothing less than a godsend to Mrs. Kempton, who "took to" Tom Heston's wife at once, and became amazingly fond of Lucy.

The presence of these three, especially the

ladies, made a great change in Crow Nest, and Mrs. Kempton was positively enraptured by their arrival.

"We have been very much to ourselves for a long time," said she, "but as soon as it becomes known that we have gained such an attraction as Lucy, we will have all Glengartney rushing out here in a mass, and the trouble will then be to keep the men away. I am only afraid that she will be married off-hand, in spite of our best exertions."

Lucy blushed at the compliment, but smilingly declared that there was no danger of that, knowing that she was for no person in Glengartney while George Warner lived.

Tom Heston, however, could not be considered good company, at least at the first of his visit.

He was moody, and worse than moody; he was flighty, and his restless ways and occasional queer talk made the Kemptons as well as his own family uneasy.

After a while his pleasant surroundings, with abundant exercise and the wonderful air of the hills, made a great change in him.

He became fond of shooting excursions with Eric Kempton, took a lively interest in the sawmill, and was glad to ride out on the range and look after the sheep.

So he soon brightened up remarkably, gaining in health of mind as well as of body, and then he was found to be a most desirable acquisition to the household at Crow Nest.

Eric Kempton desired to render to his partner an accounting of the sawmill and sheep-raising enterprises as far as they had been carried on, and he was very particular in wishing everything to be exact and shipshape.

Though he had books devoted to each, which he had kept carefully and methodically, so that any man of ordinary intelligence could easily understand what had been done, and what was the present condition of the business, he proposed that Andrew Gartney, who was an expert in book-keeping, should be invited to Crow Nest, to examine the accounts and make sure that they were correct.

Tom Heston protested that this was unnecessary bother, as he was quite willing to accept his partner's statements and abide by his balances; but Kempton, who was very strict and straight in business matters, insisted that the old Scotchman should be brought in as a sort of referee or mutual friend, to audit the accounts and certify to their correctness.

As Andrew Gartney was considered good company, and was a great favorite at Crow Nest, it was easy to override the objections of Tom Heston, and the old gentleman, duly invited, put in a prompt appearance.

So there was a long session over Eric Kempton's books—a session which seemed to be considerable of a bore to Tom Heston, who could hardly be induced to take the faintest interest in the accounts, which ended in the declaration of Andrew Gartney that everything was quite correct, and that no fault was to be found with his friend's bookkeeping.

The sawmill showed a good profit, and there was reason to believe that the sheep business would give a balance on the right side at the close of the year.

Tom Heston expressed himself as entirely satisfied with this showing, and the three men adjourned to the broad and shady veranda, where they found the ladies seated, two of them sewing, and all three conversing and enjoying the exhilarating air and the lovely view.

Eric Kempton had some notable Scotch whisky, which he had procured from a reliable house at the East for the special comfort and delectation of his old friend, and this was brought out in honor of the occasion.

Mrs. Kempton furnished the hot water and sugar, and the old Scotchman prepared his favorite beverage, smacking his lips over it, and pronouncing it unquestionably the genuine article, with the true smoky flavor of the Highland still.

It warmed the cockles of his heart, and its mellowing effects were manifest not only in old-fashioned compliments to the ladies, but in fatherly advice to Eric.

"You would have hardly got me out here to-day, my boy," said he, "in spite of these attractions, if you hadn't said that there were some matters of bookkeeping to be looked into, and you know how fond I am of that sort of thing."

"I hope that I have not drawn you away from any business of importance," observed Eric.

"Well, to tell the honest truth, I was so glad to come that nothing less than a matter of life and death would have kept me away; but I did have some pretty important business on hand, and it was connected, strange to say, with the stage robbery that occurred near here not very long ago."

Tom Heston started at this, but quickly turned his face from the others, so that his change of countenance should not be noticed.

"You and I had something to do with that affair, Eric," continued the Scotchman, "and I have no doubt that you remember it."

"Indeed I do, and I have cause to, as all my

misfortunes came upon me in a heap a little before and a little after that event."

"You will remember that I took the victim of that outrage to Glengartney, and that I found his friends, by whom he was put in an asylum, as he was supposed to be hopelessly out of his head. A few months ago he was discharged as cured, and, after straightening up his business matters, being a man possessed of considerable wealth, he went East to look for his nephew, who was his nearest living relative, if not the only one."

"You have told me that before," observed Eric.

"Yes; but you have not heard the sequel, and that is the strangest part of the whole business. It seems that this man, who had become quite a friend of mine, had hardly reached New York when he was foully murdered, stabbed to death by an assassin in a street at night. His nephew, to whom I wrote, requesting that a search should be made, discovered this fact some time after the occurrence, and has now come on here with proofs of the uncle's death, to settle up his estate."

"Are you sure that the man who was killed is the same man of whom you have been speaking?" inquired Heston, and the huskiness of his voice attracted immediate attention.

"There seems to be no doubt about that," answered Andrew Gartney. "This young man was careful to have that matter settled, so that there could be no question about it, and he has secured legal proofs of his uncle's death."

"It was supposed for a time that I was the man who was killed."

"I do not wonder at that, as there is a remarkable resemblance; but, as it evidently was not you, it must have been the other man. By the way, the nephew's name is George Warner, and he is one of the brightest and brainiest young fellows I ever met. I will bring him up here, Mrs. Kempton, if you will let me, as he has already become a great favorite of mine, and I would like Miss Heston to see him."

"I know him well," remarked Lucy. "He is one of our oldest and best friends."

Mrs. Heston and Lucy had been startled by the mention of George Warner's name, but had controlled their emotions admirably.

"That is singular, but highly satisfactory," said the Scotchman. "Hello! what people are those, riding up toward the house?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN EXPOSER EXPOSED.

THE persons alluded to by Andrew Gartney were a man and a woman, and they were such a conspicuous couple, that it was no wonder that the attention of all was immediately drawn to them.

They were mounted on the finest horses that could be procured in Glengartney, and their personal appearance conformed to the quality of their steeds.

The man swarthy, black-mustached, and well-dressed, presented a distinguished appearance, but was quite eclipsed by the woman, who had brought the latest styles to Glengartney, and did not scruple to display them.

"I think I know the man," observed Kempton.

"I am sure that I do," said Andrew Gartney; "and the lady must be his side partner, or whatever position she may hold in that infernal establishment of his."

"The woman is known to some of us, too," spoke up Tom Heston. "We are getting all together here now, and I suppose there will be a picnic."

This was a queer remark; but Tom Heston had become noted for that sort of thing, and no notice was taken of what he said.

Eric Kempton sounded a whistle, and his stableman came forward to take care of the horses of the visitors.

Manuel del Castro—of course the swarthy and black-mustached man was he—dismounted and assisted his companion to dismount, which she did very gracefully, and they deliberately approached the house.

As he reached the veranda he politely raised his hat.

"I hope you have not forgotten me, Kempton," said he.

"I remember you well, Mr. Del Castro," answered Eric, without noticing the offered hand. "Here are seats for you and your friend, if you will sit down and rest after your ride."

This was not a cordial welcome, but it was better than none, and the visitors accepted the seats that were offered them, the lady planting herself with the air of a person who has something to do and means to do it.

A hostile intention was clearly evident to Mrs. Heston and Lucy, and they mentally and physically braced themselves up for the expected encounter.

"Perhaps, Kempton," observed the Spaniard, "you are not aware of the fact that I have established myself in business in Glengartney."

"I have heard something of it," answered Eric, who had his own opinion of the business in which his former friend was engaged, as well as certain suspicions concerning the friend.

"It is not the sort of business I would have

preferred; but we cannot always choose to suit ourselves. But I am forgetting. This lady is Mrs. Frias. I am not sure that you ever met her."

Mrs. Frias rose at this allusion to herself, and made a comprehensive bow, with a comprehensive smile that elicited no response.

"I have heard of her," observed Eric.

"Yes, in connection with a stage-robbery near here, when you and I chased the two robbers, and one of them happened to get shot. That was the husband of this lady, and he was at her door, as well as at death's door, when we came up with him. You may remember that he fell dead in her arms."

"I do remember. She seems to have prospered since then."

"Quite so. She was then an object of compassion, and you were good to her, making me your almoner, and your money enabled her to get away from the scene of her great trouble. She came into possession of a little fortune afterward, through the death of a relative, and has been prosperous, as you say. I met her in San Francisco, and since then we have been fast friends."

"I remember the lady," interposed Andrew Gartney. "She used to be known about here as the Witch of Shasta."

"And I am not ashamed of the title," declared Mrs. Frias. "I do not know why it was given to me, nor do I care. I am still willing to be called a witch, if a witch is a person who tells secrets, and discloses the past and the future. That is what I am here for to-day."

She drew herself up with a defiant air, and Mrs. Heston and Lucy braced themselves again.

There could no longer be any doubt that she was there with a hostile purpose.

"Mr. Del Castro has said," continued Mrs. Frias, "that you and he, Mr. Kempton, pursued two stage-robbers. One of them was shot and killed. That was my unfortunate husband. The other escaped with the plunder, and very valuable plunder it was, as I have good reason to know."

"I have the numbers of the certificates of stock that were taken," interrupted Andrew Gartney.

"So have I. They were given to me before the robbery by the man who escaped. He knew just what he was going to get, and he got it. It was he who tempted my husband to help him commit that crime, and who was alone responsible for the robbery. He came to our cabin, a man who seemed to be as poor as we were then, and that is no little to say, proposed that scheme to my husband, showed him just what he expected to gain by it, and persuaded him to go and help rob that stage. My husband was killed, as you know; but the tempter got off without a scratch, and never gave another thought to the widow of the man whom his deed had sent into eternity."

The widow aforesaid brought this out in dramatic style, and with a display of deep feeling that may have been entirely natural, but without any decided effect upon her auditors.

Mrs. Heston and Lucy sat erect, with the look of people who knew what was coming, and expected to endure it.

Andrew Gartney had let his spectacles drop down on his nose, and an unusually heavy frown had gathered on his brow.

Eric Kempton had looked straight at the speaker, as if it was his duty not to miss a word she said.

Mrs. Kempton, leaning forward a little in her chair, fixed her gaze on Mrs. Frias, but more particularly on her ears.

After a while she arose, and walked around to the rear of that lady, and inspected her from that position, and then resumed her seat.

Tom Heston, who was seated near the table that held the Scotch whisky poured out a glass nearly full of that liquor and drank it when nobody seemed to be noticing him.

It was not a palatable beverage, taken "dry so," but it seemed to furnish him with the nerve he needed, as he straightened up, and listened to the speaker with apparent unconcern.

"Who was that stage robber who escaped?" demanded Mrs. Frias, after a slight pause for further dramatic effect. "Who was the scoundrel who became a rich man by means of his plunder, while my husband was cold in his grave? Who was that man and where is he now? His name was Tom Heston, and there he sits!"

She turned in her chair quickly as she spoke, and faced Tom Heston as if she was sure that the triumph of her revenge had come.

The eyes of all the others were turned upon him; but he sat there calm and quiet, and his only outward sign of emotion was an unusual smile.

"I am glad that you have spoken plainly, Mrs. Frias," said he, "as it gives me a chance to meet this charge as directly as it was made. It is not the first time that it has been brought against me by the same person—never by any other person. She invaded my rooms at San Francisco, telling me substantially the same story that she has told here, and demanded money. I treated her as mildly as I could, regarding it as a case of blackmail, such as so

many of the wealthy men of California have been afflicted with, and finally got rid of her."

Mrs. Frias's face flushed during this recital; but she said nothing.

Tom Heston turned and faced Manuel del Castro.

"Shortly afterward," said he, "I was attacked on the street at night by that man and a ruffian in his employ, and was dragged into an empty house, where they tried to force me to write an order for a large sum of money, payable to that woman. But I was too smart for those scamps, and I got away from them, leaving them tangled in their own trap. Afterward, when I had gone to New York, and when I was supposed to be dead, the woman frightened my wife and daughter with the story she has told here, and tried to squeeze money out of them. She has not made a success of her scheme so far, and it looks to me as if she is not likely to get anything out of it."

Mrs. Frias faced the audience, and deliberately made this statement in reply.

"What that man has said is partly true—that is, there is enough truth in it to color his untruths; but what I have told you is exactly true. Do you deny the statements I have made about that stage robbery?" she fiercely demanded, turning to Heston.

"I surely do deny them, all and every one of them," he answered. "As I told you in San Francisco, if you are honest in telling your story, which I greatly doubt, you have mistaken me for some other person."

Andrew Gartney took a hand in the game.

"We have here," he said, "the unsupported statement of Mrs. Frias, to which is opposed the absolute denial of Mr. Heston. I see nothing that can be made of it."

"But I can prove what I have said," retorted the Witch of Shasta.

"If you can, that is another matter."

"Mr. Del Castro helped to pursue the robbers, and he afterward recognized that man as one of them."

"That can hardly be so," broke in Eric Kempton. "I was ahead of Del Castro in the pursuit, and I am sure that I was at no time near enough to see the face of either of them, until we came up with Austin Frias and discovered that he was fatally wounded."

Mrs. Frias flashed a glance of hatred at the speaker.

"The lady was not exactly accurate in that statement," observed the Spaniard. "I thought I perceived a resemblance, but could not be sure."

With this prop knocked out, Mrs. Frias could only fall back upon the declaration that she was willing to swear to the truth of the story that she had told.

Then Mrs. Kempton had a part to play, and she played it with spirit and grace.

She was a small woman, a decided blonde, with hair that was almost flaxen, bright blue eyes, and delicate features, but possessed of courage and energy, that were quite out of proportion to her size.

She got up, stepped lightly forward, and planted herself in front of Mrs. Frias.

"I will thank you for my earrings," she mildly remarked.

This was a small thunderbolt; but it struck hard.

Mrs. Frias jumped up, hot with rage, and towered over the little lady.

"Your earrings? What do you mean? What have I to do with your earrings?"

"Those diamond earrings that you are wearing. They are mine. They were stolen from this house shortly after the stage robbery of which you have spoken."

"Are you sure that you know what you are saying? I hope this is not a case of sudden insanity. These earrings were presented to me by a gentleman in San Francisco."

"Who was he?"

"That is none of your business."

"Of course it is not, though you might state the fact more politely. I don't care who gave them to you, and all I want is my earrings."

"Your earrings, indeed!"

"Oh, there is no doubt of that. I have been taking careful note of them since you have been here, and I know that they are mine. Do you not recognize them, Eric?"

"I can see that they are exactly like yours, my love."

"Why, the thief has not even taken the trouble to change the settings. They are exactly as they were when stolen, and on each of them there is a private mark of my own, a small cross cut in the gold."

"That is absolute evidence," exclaimed Andrew Gartney. "If the mark is there, the jewels belong to Mrs. Kempton."

"There is no such cross on these earrings," confidently replied Mrs. Frias, "and you can examine them to suit yourselves."

She took off the earrings, and handed them to the Scotchman, who examined them carefully, and passed them around to the others for examination.

No such mark as Mrs. Kempton had mentioned was visible; but that lady had taken the precaution to provide herself with a small micro-

scope, and under it the cross could easily be seen.

"There is no doubt about it now," said Andrew Gartney. "The jewels belong to Mrs. Kempton."

As he handed them to her, Mrs. Frias looked at Manuel del Castro, as if expecting him to back her up in an attempt to retain them; but that gentleman was quite irresponsible.

"It seems that Mrs. Kempton was right," he remarked, "and she is very fortunate in getting her diamonds back. It is not to be supposed, Mrs. Frias, that the gentleman who gave them to you was the thief, and we will presume that he came by them honestly. It is your misfortune."

"I have my opinion about the business, all the same," she angrily replied. "We will leave this place, Mr. Del Castro, and after such an exhibition of highway robbery, I hope that I will hear nothing more about blackmail."

Mrs. Frias and her cavalier were not hindered in their desire to leave Crow Nest, and one of them at least was considerably crestfallen as they rode away.

CHAPTER XXV.

"FOR LUCY'S SAKE."

ANDREW GARTNEY rode home from Crow Nest alone, thinking hard by the way, and his thinking usually amounted to something.

At his office he found George Warner awaiting him, occupying his leisure with a law book, as the young inventor was always eager to absorb whatever information came to hand.

"Did you have a nice time?" inquired George.

"Very nice, except for a little unpleasantness just before I came away. The Kemptons are special friends of mine, and I always enjoy myself with them. Miss Heston is a lovely girl, Warner, and Mrs. Kempton said that I might bring you up to see her."

"Oh, I know her well."

"So she told me, and she is well worth knowing."

"What did you think of her father?"

"Well, there was something queer about him, and a person might suppose that he is not always altogether right in his mind."

"Perhaps he is not. I hope that the unpleasantness you speak of had nothing to do with him."

"I am sorry to say that it had, though it was caused by outsiders. I will tell you about it!"

The Scotchman gave his young friend a clear and detailed account of the episode at Crow Nest, in which Mrs. Frias figured so conspicuously.

"It is a strange story, Warner," he remarked when he had finished the narrative.

"Yes, it is a strange story, but it is not new to me. As Mr. Heston says, the woman brought it to his wife and daughter when he was supposed to be dead; but I fancy that I blocked her game there."

"I have been thinking about it, Warner, and it has troubled me greatly."

"Why should it trouble you?"

"Because, from the woman's confident manner in telling the story, and from other circumstances that have come under my observation, I have thought it possible that it may be true."

"Let us suppose it to be true—what then?"

"Then it would be clear that this Heston is a criminal, who ought to be brought to justice."

"Why should we bother ourselves about that?"

"For the sake of the dead, if not for the sake of the living. It was your uncle who was robbed."

"That is true; but he does not worry about it any more. Besides, there is no proof. As you have said, the story rests on the unsupported statement of a woman whose character is open to suspicion."

"Of course I would not bank heavily on the testimony of the Witch of Shasta; but there is more than that."

"What more can there be? You said that there was nothing else."

"That is what I said up there; but I have been thinking of the matter since then, and other facts have come to my mind. If this Heston was the robber the fact can be proved."

"How?"

"By a living and reliable witness."

"But you said that there was only the unsupported statement of the woman."

"I was not exactly accurate in that remark. Indeed, when I made it, I knew that there was something else, but supposed that she was not aware of it; and it was not worth while for me to give her the clue."

"That was very thoughtful in you, Mr. Gartney. Who is the living and reliable witness?"

"A young man who is now a clerk in Hitchin's store. His name is Amos Wintle, and he was the only passenger, except your uncle, in that stage at the time of the robbery."

"This is indeed news to me."

"Important news, too. The young man was ordered out with your uncle, and stood at his

side in front of the robber, to whom he was so close that he could see his features plainly."

"Did he recognize him, or believe that he would know him if he should see him again?"

"The robber had a bit of crape over the upper part of his face; but, with that exception, Wintle said he was as much like Mr. Winck as one man can be like another, and I suppose you have noticed the remarkable resemblance between your uncle and this man Heston."

"Of course I have. I was struck by it as soon as I saw the photograph you sent me. I believe that my uncle lost his life because of that resemblance—that he was killed in mistake for Tom Heston."

"What, then, are we to conclude from this state of facts?"

"If you will let me draw your conclusion for you, Mr. Gartney, it may relieve you of trouble."

I will be glad of that. What is the conclusion you draw?"

"A very simple one. I propose that we shall drop that matter immediately, and once for all; that we neither do anything about it nor say anything about it; above all, that we give no hint of it to the young man you spoke of, and I hope that he may get no hint of it from any other source."

"That is a strange proposition," insisted Andrew Gartney. "It was your uncle who was robbed, remember, and, according to that woman's story, the stolen goods made the fortune of the robber."

"If that was so, let it remain so. I must say, firmly and decidedly, that I wish to drop the matter and dismiss it from my mind."

"For personal reasons?" slyly inquired the Scotchman.

"Yes, for personal reasons. Mr. Heston showed a very friendly spirit toward me in New York, giving me a big lift in life, and I appreciate what he did, and intended to do."

"And besides?"

"Besides? Well, yes, we must remember that he has a wife and daughter who are in no way responsible for his past, and were scarcely connected with it. I would prefer not to pursue him."

"For the daughter's sake?" suggested the Scotchman.

"Yes, for Lucy's sake, if you will have it so."

"That will do. I understand you now. But, my young friend, as you are so intimate with the Hestons, I wonder that you don't go to Crow Nest to see them."

"I have been otherwise occupied, and Miss Heston has not wished to see me."

"Really, now, that is too much for me."

"I don't mean to say that she would not be glad to see me," promptly replied Warner; "but she has not yet had any pressing need of me."

"How do you know that? Have you had any communication with her or from her?"

"Nothing of the kind; but, if she should really need me, I would know it without any communication."

"The deuce you would! Well, Warner, you are a queer fellow; but you have brains, as well as plenty of other good qualities, and I believe in you, and I accept your conclusion, and will follow your wishes to the best of my ability. But I am afraid, Warner, that there is trouble ahead for the Hestons, no matter what we may do or leave undone."

"How is the trouble to come?"

"Through the woman who told that story, and through the man who was there to back her up. Suppose they should find out more than we want them to know, and so put themselves in a position to prove the woman's charges?"

"We must look out for that."

"How can it be looked out for?"

"When that woman tried to play her game in New York, by frightening Mrs. Heston when her husband was believed to be dead, I made a flank attack that routed the enemy. I intend to try the same tactics here, and have already set my machinery in motion."

"What have you done?"

"I will tell you. You may be sure that I have not been idle."

CHAPTER XXVI.

GATHERING CLOUDS.

It was not necessary for George Warner to inform anybody who was acquainted with him that he had not been idle.

He was never idle, and, when there was anything that he particularly desired to do, he never suffered the tiniest blade of grass to start under his feet when he was setting about doing it.

He had come to Glengartney mainly to consult Andrew Gartney concerning the settling up of his uncle's estate, and had speedily made great headway in that direction.

The proofs which he had brought of the death of George Winck, and the other evidence which he had secured through the advice and assistance of his friend Carruthers, had caused him to be acknowledged as his uncle's heir, and it was only necessary to wait for the completion of the

legal formalities to be put in possession of the property of George Winck, which was to be sought in various parts of the State.

To use a modern expression, slangy but forcible, there were "no flies on him."

Hardly had he reached Glengartney when he discovered that Manuel del Castro had established himself there, and it took him but a little while to learn of the presence of Mrs. Frias and Rosa.

Instantly he telegraphed to Charley Carruthers to procure from the Governor of the State of New York a requisition for the person of Manuel del Castro, charged with the murder of George Winck, and to forward it to Glengartney with the least possible delay, together with an officer to attend to its execution.

This was what he told to Andrew Gartney, and the old Scotchman was deeply impressed by the energy and determination of his young friend.

"You are a rusher," said he, "and I cannot sufficiently praise the forethought and celerity with which you have made your flank movement; but it's a far cry to Lochawe, as we say in Scotland, and in the mean time something may turn up that will worry you and your friends."

"In the mean time, Mr. Gartney, there is something else that I may be able to do."

"I must also warn you," observed the Scotchman, "that you may find it no easy matter to arrest that man and get him away from here. There are plenty of people in this vicinity who believe that an arrest on a requisition is nothing less than kidnapping. He will claim, too, that he has been once tried for the offense and acquitted."

"Simply because the name of the man he murdered had not then been discovered. That scheme cannot be allowed to work. He was clearly guilty of the murder of somebody, and it was merely through gross carelessness that he was not detained and held for another trial."

"There is another point to be considered. Del Castro is the proprietor of the Empire Saloon, and that is a power in the land. I have made a hard fight here against the saloons and gaming-houses; but they were too strong for me, and I could only gain a little point by compromising with them. The Empire is the biggest of them now, and its proprietor of course has a number of hangers on who are devoted to him. He has speedily become very popular among the rough element here, and they might make his cause their own."

"Those points must be considered, Mr. Gartney, and must be guarded against as well as possible; but, where there's a will there's a way, and I am determined to get that assassin to New York, where he will be hanged in due time."

"I commend your courage, my young friend, as well as your energy and perseverance, and hope that you will be able to back it up. By the way, if you should get into trouble, can you shoot? Did you ever fire a pistol?"

"Never, until I came here; but I have been using my spare time for practice, and consider myself a good shot now."

"Indeed! Well, you are a forethoughted fellow, I must say. I don't suppose you have ever practiced at a live target?"

"No; but I can shoot straight and quick, and I doubt if I would waver."

"I am sure that you would not, and I am sure that you can be trusted to take care of yourself. I want you to report progress to me as you go along."

"Of course I will, Mr. Gartney."

As George Warner had said, there was something that he might do in the mean time, and he proceeded to do it without a bit of delay.

He made the acquaintance of Amos Wintle, the witness of whom Andrew Gartney had spoken, and found him one of the ordinary sort of spruce young men, who appear to have been ordained from the beginning to stand behind counters and measure tapes and laces.

Amos Wintle had come to Glengartney to "take a position" in Hitchin's general store, where everything was sold, from a paper of pins to a gang plow, and he had been there since the stage-robbery that has figured in these pages; but he was dissatisfied with the work, and his pay had not been advanced as rapidly as he had been led to believe it would be.

Therefore, he was willing and even eager to accept a proposal that was made to him by the young gentleman from New York, who had been swift to improve his acquaintance and secure his confidence.

"I want a bright young man," said Warner, "who will go to San Francisco and Sacramento for me to attend to some business in connection with the settlement of an estate in which I am interested. He must be a good accountant, as I understand you are, and a man upon whom I can rely. I believe that you will suit me exactly, Mr. Wintle, and that I can make it worth while for you to accept the commission."

Warner named a figure which caused the other to jump at the offer.

Of course it was not a permanency, but it would be a good thing while it lasted, and in San Francisco Amos Wintle might find more

satisfactory employment than he had obtained in Glengartney.

"If you have any doubt of my responsibility," said Warner, "come with me to Mr. Gartney, who will guarantee the performance of any contract I may make with you."

Wintle did not doubt, but went with his new friend to visit Andrew Gartney, who fully vouched for Warner, and the young clerk, having received his instructions, left Glengartney by the earliest possible train.

"You are smart enough, Warner," said Andrew Gartney, with a twinkle of his gray eyes. "I see that you don't mean to take any chances."

"None that I can avoid taking. I believe in doing thoroughly what I have to do, and leaving no points uncovered."

There was one point that could not be speedily or easily covered, and it was decidedly a point of danger.

It was not to be supposed that George Warner could abide in Glengartney any length of time without his presence there becoming known to those who were more or less interested in his movements.

Mrs. Heston and Lucy, of course, knew that he was near them, and naturally wondered why he did not come to visit them; but Lucy had an enduring faith in George Warner's intention and ability to always do the right thing at the right time and in the right way, and it was with no impatience that she waited for him to put in his appearance.

With Mrs. Frias and Manuel del Castro, experience had shown him up in another light.

They had discovered in him a disposition, as far as their interests were concerned, to do the wrong thing at the wrong time, and in the wrong way, and they bated him for what he had done and might yet do.

Yet it was not until several days after he reached Glengartney that they learned of his presence there, and then the news came to them indirectly.

One night, when the labors and profits of the day were ended, and the Empire Saloon had finally been closed to the public, the proprietor went up-stairs to get the rest which he believed himself to have fairly earned.

Rosa had retired, not considering herself a necessary night-bird; but Mrs. Frias was sitting up, waiting for him, and her face wore a look of unusual care and anxiety.

"Sit down and light a cigar, Manuel," said she. "I have something of importance to tell you."

"You look as if you had," he answered, as he complied with her request. "Be quick about it, please, as I am dead sleepy."

"Who do you think has come to this town, and is probably following us up?"

"I don't know, and just now I am too tired to care much about it."

"But you must care. It may be a matter of life or liberty for you."

"Who is it, then?"

"That friend of the Hestons, the young engineer or machinist—George Warner is his name—the man who hunted you down and put your neck in peril."

"I am sorry to hear that," said Del Castro, startled out of his drowsiness. "How do you know it? Have you seen him?"

"No; but Eugene Coursell has seen him, and spoken with him."

The Spaniard frowned heavily, and spoke sharply as he flipped the ash from his cigar.

"That light-headed dude! I tell you, Maria, this won't begin to do, and it must be stopped. That fellow has been coming here to see Rosa until I am tired of it."

"To see Rosa?" repeated the widow with well-acted suspicion. "Why should he come to see Rosa?"

"Because he admires her."

"Of course he admires her; anybody does; but it does not follow that she must admire him. You are too absurd, Manuel. What attraction can that weak-headed boy have for her, compared with you?"

"He is the son of a millionaire, and I know, at least, that you have a weakness for wealth."

"That is natural, and perhaps Rosa has the same weakness; but neither of us proposes to make a fool of herself. I have encouraged young Coursell to come here because he is a good customer of the bar, and has dropped many dollars on the table over there. That is business, and nothing but business. Just now I am thankful to him for bringing me the important news I spoke of, and in which you seem to have lost your interest."

"I beg your pardon, Maria. As you say, the news is important. I suppose it is true; but it is strange that I have not met the man."

"Not at all strange, as you seldom leave the Empire, and I believe that he is one of the goody sort of young men who are not given to frequenting such places. Of course you would know him if you should meet him, as you have seen him in the witness chair, as well as elsewhere."

"Yes, curse him! I would like to know why he has come here."

"Why should he have come, unless to hunt

you down, as he hunted you down in New York?"

"But I was tried on that charge, and was acquitted."

"You were acquitted of the murder of the man who was not dead, not of the murder of the man who was dead. Perhaps this Warner has found out who the dead man was."

"Perhaps he has; but why should he pursue me? What matter is it of his?"

"Of course he is hunting you down in the interest of those Hestons. That sort of thing must be stopped, and there is but one way to stop it."

"You are right, Maria. He must be choked off—choked so that he will never squeal again. Fortunately we are where I have a chance to cope with a man of his stamp—where a quarrel and a quick shot can save a deal of trouble, and are not too closely inquired into. I will find that fellow and put myself in his way, and then he will wish that he had let me alone."

"You are going a little too fast, Manuel," mildly remonstrated the widow. "There is no call for you to put yourself forward in the business, or to take any sort of risk. There are plenty of men whom you can get to do the job, and who will be glad of the chance to pick a quarrel with that fresh galoot and wipe him out."

Mrs. Frias had picked up the Western slang again, as easily as she had dropped it in New York.

"That is true, Maria. Your head is always level. I know the very man who will take to such a piece of work as that as a duck takes to water."

CHAPTER XXVII.

A PAIR OF ASSASSINS.

CHARLEY CARRUTHERS was as quick to act as his friend had been, and in a very short time the latter received a telegram from him, stating that the requisition for Manuel del Castro had been procured, and had been sent to California in charge of John Minton, a Headquarters detective, who was not only experienced in the capture and control of criminals, but was well acquainted with the laws and proceedings in requisition cases.

Having thus, as he believed, got all his affairs at Glengartney in good working order, George Warner gladly consented to accompany the old Scotchman to Crow Nest.

He had not as yet received one of those peculiar intimations by which he was supposed to know that Lucy Heston specially needed him; but he was anxious to see her, and he felt that he had denied himself that pleasure quite long enough.

If he had been compelled to confess the fact, he would have admitted that he was not really desirous of meeting Tom Heston just then, and it is likely that this was what had kept him so long away from Crow Nest and from Lucy.

He need not have given himself any uneasiness on that score, as since the visit of Mrs. Frias the presence of the capitalist at Crow Nest had been, so to speak, chiefly noticeable because of his absence.

After that event another change came over him, and he was again subject to fits of moodiness and flightiness, which took the form of wandering, his absences frequently extending from early in the morning until late at night.

These absences had nothing to do with hunting, as he never took either a gun or a horse; nor was it likely that they had anything to do with business, as he was no more seen at the sawmill or the sheep-range; consequently they caused his family more or less uneasiness, which they were obliged to endure.

On one occasion Eric Kempton, who had been riding over the country, caught sight of him at the old Glengartney stage road, and just at the spot where the stage which carried George Winck had been "held up."

Kempton was about to go forward to speak to him; but something in the man's attitude and air told him that his company was not desired, and he turned his horse's head and quietly rode away.

He had ideas of his own concerning the incident, but confided them to no person but his wife, and to her only on condition of silence.

Thus there was nothing to interfere unpleasantly with George Warner's visit at Crow Nest, where he was warmly welcomed by Mrs. Heston and Lucy, and was not once taken into favor by Eric Kempton and his wife, who were of the opinion that Andrew Gartney had not spoken of him too highly.

They gave him a fair opportunity for private conversation with Lucy Heston, which he appreciated and improved.

Lucy did not fail to mention to him the visit of Mrs. Frias and its object.

"I know all about that," answered Warner. "Mr. Gartney was here, you remember, and he gave me all the particulars. I am sorry that you had such an unpleasant episode, and trust that it will not occur again. I am sure that she can do you no harm, and it is likely that she will not try to annoy you again. So you must not worry about it."

"I am not a bit afraid of her, George, but

father has not been himself at all since then, and mother and I are troubled about him."

She told the young man about her father's wanderings and moody ways, and Warner naturally drew his own conclusions.

"I am afraid that it is no easy matter to find a cure for that," he said. "You must try to make things bright for him, and if you and your mother can't cheer him up, with Mrs. Kempton to help you, I don't know what can be done."

The young man rode back to Glengartney with his old friend at an early hour, much pleased with his visit, but troubled for Lucy's sake on account of her father, and the remarks of Andrew Gartney on the way did not tend to allay his uneasiness.

"That man has a weight on his mind which he cannot throw off," said the Scotchman. "I am afraid that it is enough of itself to get him into trouble, if the trouble should come in no other way."

Warner held the same opinion, but did not express it, contenting himself with the hope that Tom Heston's present mood would change.

At night the young man, feeling restless and disinclined to read or to sleep, left the hotel, and went out for a walk.

He sauntered along the main street of Glengartney, and looked in at the brilliantly-lighted saloons, together with the gaudy combination of music-hall and dance-house, but without any desire to take part in the rude and perhaps dangerous festivities, as they were not at all in his line.

He had a closer and longer look at the Empire than at any of the other places, and perceived that the room was crowded, and that the bar was lined with customers.

"The fellow is doing a big business," he muttered, "and no doubt he is well backed up here. I am afraid that he will prove to be, as Mr. Gartney says, a tough subject to tackle; but it has got to be done."

Tired of these sights and sounds, he then tramped out into the country, where the quiet, cool night air, and the unspeakable influence of the starry sky, soothed his spirits and exalted them.

Feeling rested at last, and in the mood for sleep, he turned and retraced his steps toward Glengartney.

He had nearly reached the little town when he perceived two men coming toward him, whom he would be obliged to meet.

There was clearly no reason why he should avoid them, and he would have considered it an act of causeless cowardice to get out of their way.

They appeared to be nothing more than ordinary rough subjects, possibly not tough ones, who had been enjoying themselves at the Glengartney saloons, and were wending their way homeward.

Yet it would have seemed strange to George Warner, if he had been well acquainted with the customs of that section of the country, that they were afoot.

As soon as they were within a few paces of him, it became evident that their intentions were hostile.

One of them was big Bill Sammis, who had the encounter with Eugene Coursell at the Empire Saloon, and the other was a well-known tough citizen who then styled himself Rio Arriba—commonly called Reeber—though he had been known by other names in other camps and settlements.

The terror of Topnotch opened the ball, stopping suddenly in front of Warner, and assuming an attitude and a tone that were calculated to terrify an ordinary tenderfoot.

"Thar he is!" shouted the big rustler. "Thar's the thievin' cuss that stole my dust when I lay sick in Sandy Gulch, and left me there to die. I swore that I'd camp on his trail till I shot him in his tracks, and now I've got the durned galoot whar I want him."

This bloodthirsty speech was doubtless an earnest of bloodthirsty intentions; but it happened that George Warner was a tenderfoot who was not easily terrified.

His pistol-practice at Glengartney had given him confidence in his ability to defend himself, and, though he had never shot at a live target, there seemed to be before him a chance to try his skill upon two beings in human shape whom civilized society could afford to lose.

The encounter, as it chanced, had taken place in front of a deserted cabin at the roadside, against the rude wall of which the young New Yorker promptly backed.

As he did so, he drew his revolver, keeping a close watch on his two opponents, and discovering, much to his delight, that he had anticipated any such action on their part.

Quite unexpectedly to them, he had "got the drop" on them.

"Stand back!" he firmly ordered, as coolly as if he was directing the management of a piece of machinery. "Stop right where you are! The first man who moves or raises a hand will drop where he stands."

This was not only unexpected and peculiar, but, under the circumstances, was decidedly a set-back to the enterprising toughs.

They had not counted on meeting this kind of a tenderfoot, or they would not have allowed him so easily to get the advantage of them.

Being checked so suddenly in their wild career, it was necessary to temporize and to feel their way toward a strategic movement.

"Well, you air a murderous cuss," observed the terror of Topnotch. "The only wonder is that you hadn't killed me up thar in Sandy Gulch, instead of leavin' me thar to die."

"Do you know the man you are talking to?" inquired Warner.

"Reckon I do. You don't mean to deny that you are Tom Gulley, who was my pardner up thar in Sandy Gulch."

"I do, though, and you know that you have been lying, and that you two have struck me here because you want to clean me out or wipe me out, whichever it may be. I tell you now that the scheme won't work, and that you will get hurt if you fool with me any more."

"This is gittin' ser'ous," observed Bill Sammis.

"It is serious already, and you had better go right along up the road, as this gun of mine is very soft on the trigger, and my finger sometimes gets the jerks."

"This is gittin' ser'ous," repeated the big rustler, "and I reckon we'd better be a-movin'. Jest you jog along, Reeber, and we'll see ef this bloody-minded man will let us git off with our lives."

This was a shrewd suggestion, as such a movement on the part of Rio Arriba would separate them and give him a chance to flank the man against the cabin, whose attention would naturally be distracted between them.

This was doubtless what Bill Sammis had calculated on, and it is what occurred.

Rio Arriba began to slouch away up the road, and the eyes of the man at bay, who was hesitating as to what he should do, necessarily followed him.

That was the opportunity of the terror of Topnotch, and his hand darted toward his pistol belt.

He jerked out his revolver quick enough, but fate interfered, and spoiled his opportunity.

Some bit of raggedness about the belt, or his clothing, caught the hammer, and a cartridge was discharged prematurely, and into the ground.

There was no more hesitation on the part of George Warner.

His revolver cracked instantly, and the right arm of Bill Sammis fell helplessly at his side, his pistol dropping as his shot had dropped.

Warner turned immediately to face his other assailant, but perceived that he was forestalled in that quarter.

Rio Arriba had hastened to draw his revolver, but his use of the weapon was unexpectedly interrupted.

A man had quietly stepped up behind him, and had seized his coat collar with a firm grip of the left hand, while with the right he pressed the cold muzzle of a revolver against his forehead.

There was light enough to enable Warner to recognize the new-comer as Tom Heston.

"Drop that gun!" ordered Heston, and Rio Arriba's revolver fell to the ground.

"Step this way, Warner, and pick up those pistols," was the next order, and George instantly and cheerfully obeyed it.

"Now, you sneaking scoundrels, back up against the cabin there, and tell me what you mean by this piece of rascality?"

Heston emphasized this order by shoving the man he held against the wall of the cabin, and Bill Sammis, whose right arm was useless, and who saw no chance to retreat, had nothing to do but follow suit.

The glaring eyes of Tom Heston, even more forcibly than his cocked revolver and his commanding tones, drove them there and held them there.

"Say, Cap," entreated Bill Sammis, holding up his wounded limb with his left hand, "this arm o' mine has been nigh shot in two, and I'm afeared I'll bleed to death!"

"That would be nothing more than you deserve, you mean coyote!" answered Heston; "but we will save you for the rope. Cut his sleeve open, Warner, and tie up his arm with your handkerchief."

George obeyed this order immediately, and implicitly.

"I don't see that we have any more use for these fellows," he observed. "Suppose we let them go?"

"No, my boy; not yet. We must get at the bottom of this. Now, you miserable, whisky-soaked, cowardly scoundrel, I want to know what you mean by sneaking after a gentleman, and assaulting him in this style, and you have got to tell me, and tell me straight, or you will never have a chance to tell another lie in this world!"

Bill Sammis looked at Rio Arriba, and Rio Arriba looked straight before him.

"I hain't got nothin' to tell," remarked the latter; "so you may as well go on with the funeral. We've all got to die some time and somehow, and it don't make much differ when or how."

Bill Sammis, who was not as philosophical as his comrade, sought to save his carcass by stretching the truth.

"I reckon I made a mistake, Cap," he frankly acknowledged. "I took that young feller thar fur Tom Gulley, a pardner of mine who robbed me up in Sandy Gulch."

"That is the first lie," declared Tom Heston. "You never had anything to do with Sandy Gulch, except to be kicked out of there for a loafer and a thief. Suppose you try again."

"Well, Cap, the fact is that we was walkin' out this way, Reeber and me, and we met the tenderfoot, and we allowed he had money, and we wanted to git hold of it."

"That is another lie. You followed him out here to kill him. Perhaps you might have robbed him after you had killed him; but your game was murder. Now, I want to know who put you up to that, and I give you fair warning that another lie means death."

The terror of Topnotch hesitated, looking about as if he would be glad to get away from there.

"Cover that other man, Warner," ordered Tom Heston. "Now, you sneaking scoundrel, tell me at once who put you up to this. Who hired you to do it?"

"The Spaniard who runs the Empire," promptly answered Sammis.

"I knew it. That will do. You may go now, and I advise you to get out of Glengartney right away."

Bill Sammis and his comrade sneaked off, both badly wilted, but glad to escape so easily, and George Warner turned to Tom Heston.

"Mr. Heston, said he, 'you have saved my life.'"

"I don't think so. You seemed to be taking pretty good care of yourself when I came along. But, if I have been of any help to you here, I am glad of it."

"You have rendered me a great service, sir, and I am thankful."

"Well, my boy, you know what is the matter now, and you must look out for that sort of thing. Good-night."

"Mr. Heston?"

But Tom Heston walked away rapidly, without making any further reply, and George Warner returned to Glengartney with two extra revolvers.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A MURDEROUS DEFIANCE.

THE young New Yorker did not fail to look out for himself after his unpleasant adventure with the two toughs.

He did not wander out at night any more, but kept himself close at the hotel or at Andrew Gartney's office.

Even when he did stir out he was guarded, though he was not aware of the fact, as the Scotchman had employed a stalwart young man to watch him and see that he was not waylaid or forced into an encounter, and the stalwart young man attended to his business faithfully, though unobtrusively.

Warner had given Andrew Gartney an account of his perilous nocturnal adventure; but neither of them proposed to take any steps to punish Manuel del Castro for his share in that outrage.

It would be enough to await the arrival of the requisition, and then strike quick and hard.

They had not long to wait then.

A telegram came from John Minton, the officer who had been sent from New York in charge of the requisition.

He had taken it direct to the Governor of California, by whom it had been approved and countersigned, and he was then on his way to Glengartney.

John Minton reached the town shortly after the receipt of his telegram, and Warner perceived at a glance that he was just the man for the business.

He was a man of middle age and medium size, quiet and reserved, but evidently possessed of plenty of force and determination, which he could draw upon as occasions required.

Warner was much pleased with Minton, and Minton, though slow to disclose his sentiments, was quite as much pleased with the young man to whom he had been accredited.

The requisition having arrived, it was decided that the arrest should be made as soon as possible, and the question was how it could be made with the best chances of success.

It was of course necessary to have the counsel and the assistance of the local authorities, and John Minton promptly put himself in communication with the sheriff of the county.

That official recognized the difficulties of the case, arising from the position which Manuel del Castro then occupied in Glengartney, as well as the character of the man, and stated them pretty much as Andrew Gartney had explained them to George Warner.

There was no doubt that the Spaniard, if he chose to do so, could make things pretty sultry for those who wanted to capture him and carry him away, and the presumption was that he would choose to do so.

One favorable point was found in the fact that the population of Glengartney at that time

was largely composed of law-abiding men, who would not tolerate violent resistance to a legal process.

Still, a collision between the two elements was to be avoided if possible, and the sheriff would gladly have had nothing to do with the matter, if his duty had not compelled him to take it up.

It pleased him, therefore, to be able to turn it over to Charley Wingfield, an ambitious young deputy, who was one of the most popular men in Glengartney and its neighborhood.

When the sheriff and John Minton discussed the surest and safest way of making the arrest, Wingfield had a definite and decided opinion of his own.

"I know these Glengartney people," said he, "and I know that any secret or underhanded move would be sure to set their teeth on edge. If we should try to take the man at night after his place is shut up, or at any time out of business hours, they would regard it as a clear case of kidnapping, and would rally to his defense."

The sheriff and John Minton coincided with this opinion, and it was decided that the arrest should be made openly and in the daytime, so as to give it no special importance, and to disarm as far as possible the prejudices of the people.

It was also determined that no posse should be employed, but that Winfield and Minton should go quietly to the Empire, place their man under arrest, and endeavor to get him away without exciting any demonstration.

George Warner meant to be on hand, and he declared that he would accompany the officers, notwithstanding the remonstrances of Andrew Gartney.

"It is none of your business, and you have no right to mix up in it," said the Scotchman.

"I would like to know whose business it is, if it is not mine," rejoined Warner. "It was my uncle that the scoundrel killed, and I am the one who started this thing, and of course I must see it through."

"You must do nothing of the kind. It is in the hands of the law, and the law will look after it."

"I have noticed that the law needs a good deal of looking after, and I mean to keep my eye on it."

As the officers did not object to the young man's company, but seemed to think that he had as good a right to go along as any other citizen, Andrew Gartney's arguments were unavailing.

"I want you to understand, Mr. Warner," said Minton, "that you will go merely as a spectator; that you are to have nothing to do with the execution of the warrant, and that nobody but yourself will be responsible for your safety."

It was toward the close of the afternoon when the arrest was attempted, and at that hour business was not brisk at the Empire.

There were a number of people in the saloon, but they could easily be counted, which was not the case with the crowds that frequented the establishment at night.

Manuel del Castro was on the floor, standing at the bar and drinking with an acquaintance like an ordinary customer; but his eyes and ears were open, and he saw and heard everything that went on.

The entrance of Wingfield and his companions did not specially attract the attention of any person except the proprietor; but he caught sight of George Warner, and the unexpected appearance of that young man at that time and place caused him to jump instantly to the conclusion that there was something wrong.

His belligerent instincts were aroused, and he was ready for any action that the emergency might require.

Wingfield and Minton quietly advanced to where he stood, the former taking a paper from his pocket.

"I am sorry to trouble you, Mr. Del Castro," he said, "but it is my duty to arrest you on this warrant. You are my prisoner."

"What's that?" exclaimed the Spaniard, jumping back before the officer could lay a hand on him. "What do you arrest me for?"

"Under a requisition from the Governor of New York, for the murder of George Winck."

"That is over and done with. I was tried for that and acquitted."

"You were acquitted of the murder of the man you did not kill," remarked Minton. "The murder of the man you did kill has yet to be settled for."

"Who are you? I don't know you! Get out of here! This is a fraud."

The scene had naturally attracted the people in the saloon, and as Del Castro raised his voice, they began to crowd around him. The threatening glances they cast at the intruders showed him that he was well supported.

"You will find that everything is all right, Mr. Del Castro," insisted Wingfield. "The papers are all right, and all the proceedings are strictly legal. You had better give in and go with us quietly."

"I tell you it is a fraud!" yelled the Spaniard. "Do you suppose I am going to allow myself to

be kidnapped in my own house? Not while I am alive and have friends to back me. To Tophet with your requisitions!"

The man was very much in earnest. He had drawn a revolver, and a hasty glance around him told him that he had no reason to doubt the backing of his friends.

His loud and violent tones had attracted attention outside, and men were coming in from the street to see what was the row in the Empire.

Charley Wingfield plainly perceived that his task had become a difficult matter, and a frown settled on quiet John Minton's brow as he noted the hostile demonstrations before him.

The duty, however, lay with the deputy-sheriff, and he was ready and prompt to do it, though his face turned pale under the pressure of the task.

"I hope you don't mean to resist the execution of this warrant, Mr. Del Castro," said he. "It is a serious thing to buck against the law."

"I mean to tell you to keep your distance," answered Del Castro, speaking in measured but emphatic tones, when he saw that he was well supported. "I say that this is a fraud, and that I won't be kidnapped in my own house. I will blow a hole through the first man who tries to lay a hand on me, and the second man, too."

John Minton was about to take Wingfield by the arm, and caution him against proceeding to extremities under the circumstances; but the deputy-sheriff was too quick for the caution.

"I have come here to arrest you, and I mean to take you!" he said, as he stepped toward Del Castro.

"Take that, then!" yelled the Spaniard.

The flash, the smoke, and the loud report of his revolver told the rest of the story.

The career of the ambitious young deputy-sheriff was ended, and there was no more difficult duty for him to do in this world.

Del Castro's bullet had struck him in the right breast, passing through his body, and piercing his heart in its passage.

He was dead instantly, and he fell upon the floor without a groan.

Such a termination of the affair was unexpected by everybody except the Spaniard himself.

His friends in the saloon had looked for a possible collision, to result in hustling the officers out of the door, and neither John Minton nor George Warner had supposed that he meant to push his resistance to the extent of such a tragedy.

John Minton, who, though a cautious man, was no coward, jerked out his revolver, but there were at that moment so many persons between him and the slayer of Wingfield, that he had no chance to avenge the death of his colleague.

The Spaniard's friends, perceiving that he had already gone too far, had seized him and crowded him back, and big Frank Foss, who dealt faro up-stairs, and who was Del Castro's second in command, hurried forward to prevent any further violence.

"You will have to give this up, sir," he said, addressing himself to John Minton. "You see that the man won't let you take him, and his friends will back him up. You don't stand any chance here, and you had better get out before there's more harm done!"

The detective hesitated. It went sorely against the grain to abandon the business that had brought him there; but it was too plain that he had no chance of success, and he was not a man who was anxious to shed his blood needlessly.

Del Castro, excited almost to frenzy, was raging in the hands of his friends, hurling denunciations and threats at George Warner, who took it all very coolly, considering that he was new to such scenes.

"You will have to go," insisted Foss, "and the sooner you are out of here the safer you will be. Pick up your friend, and carry him away. I am going to shut up this place right now."

There were willing hands to help, and the body of Wingfield was lifted and carried out.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE GLENGARTNEY VIGILANTES.

THREE serious mistakes were made in the course of the unfortunate attempt to arrest Manuel del Castro.

The first mistake was the presence of George Warner with the officers, which had excited the Spaniard to the point of frenzy.

Perhaps he might have resisted as stubbornly and violently if Warner had not been there; but it was a mistake in judgment to give him that excuse for his excitement.

The second mistake was made by himself in shooting the deputy-sheriff, and he would surely never have done that deed if he had not allowed his passion to get the better of his reason.

He might, as his friends expected him to do, have resisted the arrest and expelled the officers without proceeding to such a bloody extremity, and thus have secured no small amount of sympathy and support; but he had chosen the violent course, and his rash act told against him.

The third mistake was made by Frank Foss in suddenly closing the saloon, and it was surpris-

ing that such a level-headed fellow should make such a foolish move.

In the Spaniard's peculiar and precarious position it was above all things necessary that he should have the good will of the public.

With popular sympathy on his side, he could do and dare much; with it against him, he would be a lost man, and the law could claim him as an easy victim.

In closing the saloon immediately after the difficulty, Frank Foss had done the cause of its proprietor a double injury.

In the first place, he felt himself compelled to separate the sheep from the goats, as it were, retaining in the saloon a number of men who were believed to be thick and thin friends of Del Castro, and excluding all others who happened to be present.

This necessarily created invidious distinctions, tending to alienate the sympathies of those who were excluded.

The move was a mistake, in the second place, because it shut the general public out from the Empire and its liquor.

Of course the general public wanted to gratify its curiosity by looking in at the place where Wingfield was shot, and by making inquiries on the spot; but this privilege, which amounted almost to an inalienable right, was summarily denied them.

Free whisky was another important item which was neglected in this move.

There was plenty of liquor in the Empire, and a barrel or so, freely dispensed, could not have failed to have an effect upon the general public, making converts to the cause of the proprietor, and inducing people to view his deeds leniently through an alcoholic medium.

Frank Foss had ignored the argumentative influences of free whisky, and the only excuse to be offered for him is found in his excited mental condition at the time when he decided to close the saloon.

It is quite likely that Manuel del Castro might have perceived these mistakes and corrected them if he had not been by all odds the most excited man in the saloon.

Frank Foss and the others treated him as an irresponsible person, urging him to drink for the quieting of his nerves—a most mistaken plan—and whisky was free for the faithful who remained in the Empire.

It was wasted on them, however, as they did not need to be converted, and the effects of the liberal supply were more or less demoralizing to them.

Thus it happened that they began to drop off, some of them sneaking out of the saloon, and others subsiding into stupid slumber on chairs.

Outside the aspect of affairs was quite different from that in the saloon, and the attitude of the general public boded ill to the proprietor of the Empire.

Charley Wingfield, as has been said, was one of the most popular men in Glengartney and its neighborhood, and his popularity was never more manifest than on the occasion of his sudden death.

John Minton, who had quickly formed a just estimate of the kind of people he had to deal with, saw a chance for something in the way of dramatic effect, and did not hesitate to avail himself of it.

Instead of taking the body of the deputy-sheriff to the nearest available place, he caused the bearers, who were willing enough to follow his instructions, to convey it nearly the entire length of the main street of Glengartney to the hotel.

The news had spread quickly, and every now and then the procession was halted, to allow the curious to look at the corpse and to listen to a recital of the tragic circumstances that had attended his death.

This recital was given by the quiet and reserved detective concisely and clearly, but with such forcible and telling words as were calculated to impress his hearers with the enormity of the crime committed by the Spaniard, and he did not fail to lift the light covering that had been thrown over the corpse and show them the pale and set features of the man whom most of them had admired and all of them had respected.

It was not such an oration as that of Mark Antony over the body of the murdered Caesar; but the effect was pretty much the same.

The burden of the detective's talk was that their friend, an officer of the law, had been wantonly shot down in the discharge of his duty, when he had not shown the slightest intention of doing bodily harm to the man who killed him.

The latter point was the strong one with the Glengartney public.

As far as the law was concerned, it might be right or it might be wrong, and most of them did not care to worry themselves about the failure of its methods; but the controlling fact was that Charley Wingfield had "never pulled a gun" or made a motion to do so, but had been shot down as an unarmed man, cold-bloodedly and without sufficient cause.

This state of facts was abundantly confirmed by the testimony of eye-witnesses who had been excluded from the saloon, and was enough of

itself to turn the tide of public feeling strongly against the slayer of Charley Wingfield.

Buck Stannard, the sheriff, put in an appearance promptly, and fairly boiled over with wrath when he was told of the manner of the death of his promising young deputy.

Though naturally a slow-moving and unexcitable man, this occasion spurred him into instant and energetic action, and he vowed that the murderer of Charley Wingfield should hang, if the whole country had to be raised to hunt him down.

Andrew Gartney also took a hand in fanning the flame of public indignation, and he was a good hand to blow the bellows, as he was not only very influential among the more solid citizens, but was shrewd and energetic.

In this matter he was thoroughly in earnest, and his money, as well as his influence and ability, was ready to be used for executing justice upon Manuel del Castro.

Added to these things was the effect of closing the Empire, as the silence and darkness of the saloon, usually so brilliantly lighted and such a popular resort when night set in, spoke of something dark and hidden inside.

If Del Castro and his friends believed that they were in the right, why did they not throw the place open to the public as usual, invite scrutiny, and trust to the people to pull them out of their difficulty?

As they had done nothing of the kind, it was evident that they did not trust the people, and consequently the people could not be expected to trust them.

George Warner also fanned the flame, but very cautiously and judiciously, as he was a stranger and liable to suspicion, by quietly speaking of the attempt to assassinate him by two men who admitted that they had been employed by Manuel del Castro.

John Minton, who was quick to see which way the current was setting, left the murdered man's remains in charge of Sheriff Stannard as soon as that gentleman came to the front, and hastened to attend to some business which was just then of pressing importance.

His purpose was to take measures to prevent the Spaniard from escaping before the preparations necessary for effecting his capture could be made.

With the advice and assistance of George Warner he selected a number of the zealous friends of the late Charley Wingfield, and stationed them about the Empire Saloon, surrounding the building as well as could be done, considering its situation, and instructing them to keep a close watch upon all possible means of exit.

He personally supervised these arrangements, doing part of the watching himself, and occasionally visiting the hotel, where Buck Stannard and other leading citizens were discussing the question of the surest and safest way to capture the Spaniard.

It was not doubted that the Empire Saloon was then being operated as a fortress; that the proprietor and his friends had established themselves there with the intention of defending it to the last extremity; that they were well armed and provisioned—especially in the line of liquid provisions; and that they possessed the will and the ability to make things hot for whoever should attempt to interfere with them.

Consequently it would be necessary to oppose to them a strong force, an organized force, a force that would be practically irresistible because of its character and coherence.

Such a force could only be found in a Vigilance Committee, and a Vigilance Committee was promptly organized at the hotel, under the direction of Buck Stannard, Andrew Gartney and John Minton.

Resistance to the law offered the occasion, and the inexcusable murder of Charley Wingfield furnished a strong and popular incentive.

The organization was of course secretly formed, and its operations were secretly conducted; but it was on that account all the more formidable and effective, as its work was usually felt before it could be seen, and the shadow of mystery was over it all.

In a short time, and before the night had far advanced, the rule of martial law practically prevailed in Glengartney.

Mounted and armed men patrolled all the approaches to the town, and other armed men strolled about the main street, like sentries or guards on duty.

The saloons that were open and in full blast were in no manner interfered with, and no person who was not disposed to be riotous was molested; but nearly every man seemed to think that it was advisable for him to take heed to his ways and be on his best behavior.

When this state of affairs was established, all was ready for a raid on the Empire Saloon, which was ominously dark and silent, a striking contrast to the neighboring buildings.

CHAPTER XXX.

A STATE OF SIEGE.

If those who were active in organizing the Glengartney Vigilance Committee could have looked inside of the Empire Saloon, and could have seen and heard what was going on there,

they might have felt less apprehension concerning the outcome of their operations.

Mrs. Frias had heard the pistol-shot, and, being a very wide-awake woman, she had speedily informed herself of the nature and extent of the disturbance.

It is needless to say that both its cause and the manner of its ending troubled her greatly.

Shortly after the saloon was closed to the public she came down-stairs, and was not a bit pleased with the way things were going on there.

Manuel del Castro, importuned by his bibulous friends, and being at the time in a condition of unreasoning excitement, had been deluging himself with champagne, or what passed for champagne at the Empire, until he was incapable of any sensible action or thought.

The appearance of the widow, however, had a sobering effect upon him, as he was in the habit of being calmed and overborne by her commanding ways.

"This is a bad piece of business," she said. "It is a very bad piece of business. I don't see how you can expect to get out of it, and you are surely not making it any better by the way you are going on here. Why did you shut up the place, Manuel?"

"I—I have not shut it up," he answered, looking around as if he were dazed.

"But I see that it is shut as tight as a drum."

"I attended to that, Mrs. Frias," said Frank Foss. "I had to get rid of those men with the warrant, you know, and I thought that it would be better to have nobody in here but Mr. Del Castro's friends."

"They don't seem to be very plentiful," she replied, looking contemptuously upon the men who were holding up the bar, and upon those who were anchoring the chairs to the floor.

"Some of them have stepped out," suggested Foss; "but they promised to come back."

"Good promisers, I suppose; but I would hate to bet on the performance."

"I believe that our friends can be depended on, Mrs. Frias."

"I hope so; but I can tell you, Mr. Foss, that you have made a great mistake in shutting up the place, and I don't know what Mr. Del Castro can have been thinking of when he allowed you to do it."

"Why so, madam?"

Frank Foss was getting irritated by what he considered her airs and her assumption of superiority, and he thought himself a better man than she was, at any time of day.

"Because, Mr. Foss, it is much better to have many friends than a few friends, and I have no doubt that in closing the place you have shut out more friends than enemies. There are lots of people about here who could easily be made friends, if they were not friends already; but I am afraid that you have turned them all against us by a bad move."

"That's so," exclaimed the Spaniard, upon whom her flashing eyes and commanding tones had their usual effect. "A big mistake has been made; but how are we to correct it? Shall I open up the place, Maria?"

"No, not now. It is too late. The harm has been done. That is past mending, and you will have to be bright and wide-awake if you are to get out of this scrape."

"What can be done, then?" he inquired.

"In the first place, this drinking and carousing has got to be stopped. You will stand no sort of a chance if you and your friends are going to muddle yourselves with liquor. Then we must know what is going on outside, and, if they are getting their backs up there, we must find more friends, if there are more to be found."

The friends who had anchored the chairs to the floor were clearly not to be relied on in an emergency, and it was evident that, to the mind of Mrs. Frias, the others were scarcely a better dependence.

Yet it was necessary that she should choose her instruments from among them, and she picked out a man who seemed to have retained his senses, to whom she gave her orders like a commander.

Her instructions were that he should closely observe what was going on outside, particularly noting what arrangements, if any, were being made for the capture of the proprietor of the Empire, and should ascertain how many of his professed friends could be persuaded to rally to his defense.

It was admitted by those in the saloon that this was the best thing to do at the time; but the experiment was a disappointing one.

The man slipped out of the saloon, as the dove went forth from the ark; but, unlike the dove, he did not return.

It is to be presumed that he had retained his senses sufficiently to know when he was well off, and that he did not feel disposed to rejoin the demoralized band which he had left.

After a dismal period of waiting, Mrs. Frias sent out another messenger, who proved to be more faithful or more foolish than the other, as he returned in the course of time, bringing a doleful story concerning the condition of affairs in Glengartney.

A Vigilance Committee had been formed, and was already in operation, the declared purpose

of which was to execute justice upon Manuel del Castro for what was spoken of as the unprovoked murder of Charley Wingfield.

The members of the committee were patrolling the town, and the approaches were closely guarded, and a watch had been set upon the Empire, so that its proprietor should not escape.

As for the friends of Manuel del Castro, they seemed to be just then as scarce as hen's teeth.

Those who were not against him were not for him, and it was declared to be impossible to gather to his standard such a following as should be of service to him.

This news was harrowing to those in the saloon, though Mrs. Frias, in the usual "I-told-you-so" style, said that it was just what she had expected, and it made the prospects of the party, especially of the proprietor of the Empire, look gloomy indeed.

As the drinking could not be repressed in the saloon, and as Del Castro was in a state of mind that could not be depended on for usefulness in case of an emergency, the widow persuaded him to go up-stairs with her.

No game was running then, as a matter of course, and Rosa Frias was there alone, anxious to know what was going on, and what might be expected to happen.

The arrival of those two did not tend to relieve her anxiety, except as it changed it to a certainty of peril that was near at hand and probably unavoidable.

Not for the women, though. They were not included in the warrant which had cost Charley Wingfield his life, nor were they implicated, as far as was known to any authorities anywhere, in the lawless deeds of Manuel del Castro.

Indeed, it may be guessed that Rosa, for one, would not have objected to the loss of a lover whom she feared, and that Mrs. Frias was heartless enough to feel sometimes that he had outlived his usefulness, as well as to consider her chances of coming into his property in the event of his death.

Yet it is certain that they stood by him and assisted him to the best of their ability in his time of trouble.

Rosa endeavored to console and soothe him, while the widow, having looked after means of defense and escape, stationed herself at a front window, where she could see without being seen, and watched the excitement in the main street of Glengartney.

She plainly saw the patrolmen of the Vigilance Committee, the men who were evidently watching the Empire Saloon, the groups that were as evidently talking of what had happened and was likely to happen, and various signs of preparation and expectancy.

She reported these matters to the Spaniard, who was still so dazed that they had scarcely any effect upon him, and then she went down-stairs to note what was transpiring there.

It was immediately made evident to her that there had been more desertions among the men who had been relied on to defend the place, most of them having sneaked out, on one pretext or another, except Frank Foss and those who were stupidly snoozing in the chairs.

This made the prospect so unpromising that there was no longer any question of defense, but only of escape.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A SMART WOMAN'S WORK.

AFTER glancing contemptuously but somewhat mournfully at the useless remnant of the bold defenders, Mrs. Frias took Frank Foss upstairs, determined to represent the condition of affairs in its true light, and to give Del Castro plainly to understand that there was nothing for him but flight.

He absolutely must get away from Glengartney, at least until the storm could blow over.

Of course, there was a serious question whether he would be able to get away, and she did not underrate the difficulties of the exploit.

It was known that the building was watched, that the town was patrolled, and that the roads were guarded, and it was reasonable to presume, in view of recent events, that some of those who had sneaked out of the saloon might have carried to the enemy information of the weakness of the garrison, which might cause a speedy attack to be made.

She believed, however, that she could get the man safely out of the house, and after that he must trust to luck and his own skill and cunning.

While Frank Foss took his station at the front window to watch for the expected movement, the widow stated the case to Del Castro clearly and forcibly.

"They will be coming here before long," she said. "They may break in on us at any moment, and we will have no chance to beat them off. There is only one thing to do."

"They will have to come in over my dead body, then," boldly replied the Spaniard. "I will go down-stairs, and there I will sell my life dearly."

"Why should you sell your life at any price? There is no sense in that, Manuel. Your life is worth more to you than any other man's life, or

the lives of any number of men. You would go down there to be killed on the spot, or to be caught and kept for a worse fate, and that would be the last of you."

"What else can I do?"

"Just get away from here, and stay away until this trouble is over with. Rosa and I can get along without you for a while; but we can't afford to have you killed."

"And while I was away, that millionaire's fool of a son would make himself at home here and carry off Rosa."

"Nothing of the kind. What do any of us care for that fellow, except for the dollars we can draw out of him? How can you be so absurdly jealous at such a time? This is a question of life or death, and your only chance is to escape."

"I don't see the opening for that."

"I will show it to you."

She took him to a little window in the side of the house, usually closed by a heavy shutter, which was but a little way above the roof of an adjoining one story house with high false front.

It appeared to be entirely concealed from the view of any possible watcher, or, at least, of any probable one, and from the roof below a man could easily descend to a shed and thence to the ground.

There he would find himself in the rear of all the houses on the street, with good chances for making his way to a considerable distance without being discovered.

Mrs. Frias explained this to the Spaniard, who was then cool enough to understand her and to see how he might take advantage of this means of escape.

"What will I do if I get away?" he asked.

"Where shall I go to?"

"I suppose you ought to put a long stretch of distance between you and this town," she answered; "but perhaps not just yet. If you could find a safe hiding-place, it might be better to stay near here for a while."

"I know a good place to hide."

"The old cabin that you used to live in. It is empty now."

"That is so. It has been empty for a long time, I believe, and I can find you there."

She was busily employed in stuffing sandwiches into his coat pockets.

"You don't mean that I shall starve just yet," observed Del Castro.

"Not just yet, or at any other time. I shall soon find you, and will bring you everything you want."

"Here they come!" shouted Frank Foss from the front window. "There's a crowd of them, too, and they look like an army."

They did look like a section of an army, not only by reason of their numbers and their weapons, but because of the compact and orderly manner in which they moved.

Quite a crowd of interested and curious citizens was collected about them; but it was easy to distinguish the men who meant business from those who were merely lookers on.

"There is no time to lose," said Foss, as he ran back to his friends. "They are coming straight here. If you are going to get away, Manuel, you must run for it right now."

"Help me out, then."

The Spaniard was squeezed out of the little window, and with the help of his faro-dealer was lowered to the roof of the adjoining house, from which he let himself down upon the shed, jumped to the ground, and passed out of sight.

Mrs. Frias looked and listened eagerly, hoping to catch sight of him as he fled further, and fearing to hear a shot that might put a stop to his flight; but she neither saw nor heard anything more in that direction.

There could not have been a more propitious moment for Del Castro's attempt, as the attention of those outside was turned to the front of the house, where the attack was expected to be made.

The crowd reached the saloon, and a loud hail, accompanied by pounding on the door, proclaimed their purpose of entering.

"Run down, Frank, and let them in," ordered Mrs. Frias, and she hastened to close the shutters of the little window, lest it should betray the manner of Del Castro's escape.

The few people who remained in the bar-room were not disposed to offer any resistance when they heard the hail and the pounding, but were undecided as to what they should do until Foss came down.

He immediately unlocked the doors of the saloon, and threw them wide open to the Vigilance Committee, who were doubtless greatly surprised at finding the place so absolutely undefended and easy of capture.

"Where is Manuel Del Castro?" sternly demanded Buck Stannard. "He is the man we want."

"I really don't know where he is," mildly answered Foss, as cool and undisturbed as if he were seated behind his faro lay-out. "He went out a while ago, and I haven't seen him come back."

"What's that you are giving us, young man? This is a serious business, and you had better keep yourself out of the scrape by telling the

straight truth. We know that he has not left this house."

"Might as well call me a liar; but of course you don't mean that. You are surely mistaken, Mr. Stannard. Men have been going and coming in here all the evening, and he was one of those who went out."

"Where did he go to?"

"That is more than I know, as he said nothing to me about it. Perhaps Mrs. Frias can tell you, if you will step up-stairs."

"I don't believe that he has left this house, and we mean to look through it and find him."

"Of course you will look through the house if you want to; but I am sure that you will not find Mr. Del Castro here."

After making arrangements for guarding the saloon and keeping order, the sheriff detailed several of his men to search the lower part of the establishment, and then went up-stairs with John Minton and George Warner, followed by Frank Foss.

As treachery was possible at that stage of the game, they proceeded cautiously, with weapons ready for use, but discovered no occasion for any such preparations.

Up-stairs they found nobody but Mrs. Frias and Rosa, seated near a lamp, one sewing and the other reading, to all appearances a peaceful pair who had not been disturbed by anything.

This quiet and homelike scene had such an effect upon Buck Stannard that he apologized for his intrusion before he stated his errand.

"You will not find Mr. Del Castro here," placidly answered the widow. "He went away something like an hour ago, and I suppose he has left town."

"Did he tell you that he was going to skip the town?"

"He told me that he was going to Salt Lake. I should think that some of you would have seen him when he left the house."

"Did he go out at the front door?"

"I cannot say. I took no notice of that. But I supposed that he went openly."

"He has not left this house. If he had tried to do so, we would have caught him."

"That is very strange; but I have no doubt that he has gone away. It is no affair of mine, anyhow."

"I don't say that it is, madam; but we must search this house, thoroughly."

"Search, then, and satisfy yourselves."

The Vigilantes of Glengartney did search and satisfy themselves, much to their dissatisfaction.

Every apartment up-stairs, together with every hole and corner and possible place of concealment in the Empire Saloon, was thoroughly and minutely examined; but nothing was seen of Manuel del Castro.

While this was going on, Mrs. Frias and Rosa quietly attended to their sewing and reading, as if they had no interest in the prevailing excitement.

Buck Stannard and his friends were finally obliged to admit that it was impossible to find the Spaniard in that establishment, and the question was, what had become of him?

The sheriff angrily fastened upon Frank Foss as the person who must furnish a solution of the mystery.

"You know what has become of that cuss," said he. "I have a great mind to string you up until you confess the truth."

"String away," coolly answered the far-dealer. "I have told you all I know about him. If you should string the life out of me, you could get nothing more."

The Vigilantes either believed him, or thought it useless to torture him, as they quietly went away.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A TIGHT SQUEEZE.

THE man for whom this vigorous search was being made was not having anything like a good time; but he was alive, and was really much better off than if he had remained and had been captured in the Empire Saloon.

In that case a short strait and a tight rope would have been his fate; as it was, he had chances to win, though the game was rough.

As has been said, the moment of the Spaniard's emergence from the window was propitious for his escape, as the general attention was directed elsewhere, and he easily got to the ground without being observed.

There he found himself in a tangle of back yards, fences, outbuildings and the like, which not only presented obstacles to his progress, but offered opportunities for his discovery from the houses which he would be obliged to pass.

It would be well to get outside of them all, and, as there were but few and scattered buildings back of those on the main street, he thought that it would be best to take to "the open," at the same time keeping close in the shadow of such cover as he could find.

By this time he was pretty well in the possession of his senses, and he meant to use them for all they were worth in securing his safety.

So he scrambled over the nearest fence, and hurried forward as fast as he could, with due

regard to the necessity of keeping himself concealed from possible observation.

The night was favorable to this purpose, as it was cloudy and dark, though the darkness rendered his progress much slower and more difficult than it would otherwise have been.

He got on after a fashion, cursing occasionally at unexpected obstacles and pitfalls, but cheered by the consoling fact that he had not thus far been seen by anybody, until he reached the last of the buildings that lined the main street of Glengartney.

Then he halted under the cover of a shanty to consider the situation, and decide what he should do next.

Before him, and at the right, was an open space of country, with a few scattered shanties, offering no cover for the flight of such a fugitive as he, and at the left was a road which was a continuation of the street.

In the middle of the road was a solitary horseman with a rifle, evidently on guard, and in the open space at the right was another similar sentry.

It would be impossible to pass between them without being discovered, and equally impossible to get out of their way in either direction.

Then a lucky thought occurred to him, and he proceeded to act upon it at once.

He knew that a drain crossed the road near where the sentry was stationed—a culvert, or little bridge covering it—through which passed the water of a small brook or ditch, which was wet enough in wet weather, but was then dry, or nearly so.

The bed of the stream meandered through the opening, and passed within a few yards of the shanty behind which he was concealed.

Its depth was about half the height of a man, and by stooping or crawling he could make his way along it unseen, and could thus cross the road, after which his course must be determined by circumstances.

He threw himself upon the ground, not relying upon the darkness to cover him, and wormed himself along until he reached the ditch, into which he dropped silently.

Once within this cover, he did not propose to show his head above it, but crawled forward cautiously on his hands and knees, heedless of dirt, or of the possible presence of poisonous reptiles.

As Mrs. Frias had said, it was then a question of life or death with him, and he had come to the conclusion that his life was worth saving.

When he approached the road he could plainly hear the stamping of the sentry's horse there; but that did not worry him, as he was sure that he was not visible as long as he could not see anybody.

So he crawled under the road, and there he halted, not only because he was tired, but because he needed to consider his next step.

He discovered that the ditch, considerably to his disappointment, extended but a little distance beyond the road, as it opened there and spread out over a slope, down which its contents ran in the wet seasons.

As he was considering whether he could afford to trust himself further, something happened that settled the question for him.

Several horsemen came from Glengartney at a rapid pace, and they halted near him in the road, and began a conversation which was unpleasantly interesting to him.

"That man has escaped," said the spokesman of the party. "He has got out of his saloon somehow, and we don't believe that he is anywhere in the town."

"You fellows must have been keepin' a bad watch there," observed the sentry.

"We have done our best, but he has got away. Could he have passed anywhere near you without being seen by you?"

"Nary time. I've got eyes like a hawk, and have been usin' them for all they're worth."

"I suppose it is the same with the other guards. I don't see how the cuss could have got through the line. He may be hid somewhere in town yet, and we must double the sentries and keep them close together, so that there will be no chance for him to slip by."

The speaker and his party separated, some of them going to the right of the road, and some to the left of it, taking up positions like pickets on duty.

Manuel del Castro looked out from his hiding-place, and saw a mounted sentry stationed on the slope down which he had thought of escaping further, effectually blocking his path in that direction.

Well, there was one thing he could do, and that did not require any exertion.

He was apparently safe where he was, and all he had to do was to stay there.

It was a very uncomfortable thing to do, especially as he was tired and sleepy; but the hardness of the bed and the exigencies of his position compelled him to do his best to keep awake.

He did keep awake, and it was broad daylight before there was any favorable change in the situation.

Then it seemed that the Vigilantes of Glengartney must have come to the conclusion that he was not to be found, or that they had de-

termined to draw in their lines so as to close upon him if he should still be hiding in the town.

One by one the sentries were withdrawn, going toward the town, and when the Spaniard was satisfied that those who had been near him were well out of the way, he made his break.

One thing that troubled him just then was the loss of his revolver, which he had probably dropped in the ditch as he worked his way toward the road; but he could not think of going back to look for it.

He ran down the slope as swiftly as his stiffened limbs would carry him, and was soon in the hills, where he was safe from pursuit or anything but a casual encounter with some human being.

No such encounter occurred and he safely reached the little old cabin, which he found open, and gladly entered it.

He was then so worn out by fatigue and loss of sleep, that he scarcely took the trouble to close the door, but dropped on the floor, and all his cares and dangers were quickly lost in slumber.

His sleep was sound and long, and he was still sleeping there when the door softly opened, and Mrs. Frias stole in and awoke him.

She had got away from Glengartney without being noticed, and had brought him some provisions and liquor—not champagne—together with the news.

The news was not much, though what there was of it was painfully interesting to him.

Buck Stannard and the Vigilantes had searched every house and every hole and corner in Glengartney, and were then supposed to be hunting the fugitive in the surrounding country; but the widow did not believe that they would be likely to strike that cabin in their search.

"Somebody might happen along, though," said she, "and you ought to look out for yourself. When I came in, you were sleeping as if you were dead."

"There is that hole under the floor which your husband made. I could hide there and get away, if it should be necessary."

"You would have to keep your wits about you, Manuel, so that you should not be taken unawares."

"I can take care of myself. I only wish that you had brought me a shooter, as I have lost mine. How long do you think I had better hang about here?"

"I can't say yet, as there is nothing that is certain about anything. Unless this trouble blows over pretty soon, you will have to go away and leave your affairs in my hands."

"They are in your hands now—yours and Frank's—and I have no doubt that they will be properly attended to. But I hope, Maria, that you will not allow that young Coursell nuisance to hang around there and make love to Rosa."

"How can you be so absurd, Manuel? Neither I nor Rosa cares anything about that fellow, except for the money he may drop in the place. Of course he shall not make love to Rosa."

"If I thought he did, I would hunt him down and kill him."

"You are getting too much in the habit of killing people, I am afraid. Take care of yourself until I see you again."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WORRYING THE DUDE.

MRS. FRIAS had lied deliberately when she assured Manuel del Castro that Eugene Coursell should not be allowed to make love to Rosa, as the Spaniard's absence gave her just the opportunity which she had been longing for.

She had encouraged Manuel to the belief that Rosa was to become his wife, and this arrangement had been treated as such a settled thing, that he had scarcely ever doubted that it would be carried out in good faith.

By reason of this confidence she had been able not only to make the Spaniard very useful to her in money matters, but to persuade him to the assassination from which his present trouble had arisen.

It has been hinted, however, that she thought that he might have outlived his usefulness as regarded her, and there were other considerations that pressed upon her selfish soul.

Rosa not only feared Del Castro, but disliked him, and it would not do for her to be mixed up with such serious difficulties as he had fallen into, and there could be no doubt that Eugene Coursell was infatuated with her and would marry her at the drop of a hat, and they could not wish a better chance than they had in Glengartney to capture and corral the young heir of the Excelsior Soap business.

So Eugene Coursell was taken into high favor at the Empire immediately after the departure of the proprietor, and made himself as completely at home there as if he owned the place.

Indeed, the widow hinted to some of her near acquaintances that the wealthy young New Yorker had secured a controlling interest in the Empire, and this hint, together with his airs of ownership, caused him to be looked upon, if not looked up to, as the proprietor.

If his indulgent but careful father could have seen the young man as he swaggered about that

saloon, taking upon himself the direction of affairs, he would have closed up his business at once and carried his son back to New York; but the elder Coursell never entered a saloon, and there was nobody to report to him the proceedings of his dissolute son.

Eugene made a strong endeavor to become a public favorite by the liberal use of free liquor, and it may be said for him that his lavish treats at the bar of the Empire were mostly at his own expense; but it is a fact that there can be no solid popularity among such people as he had to deal with, unless it is headed by the respect that is mixed with fear.

As Eugene did not win any respect, he was regarded by some as a plaything, by others as a bonanza, and at any moment their playful humor might prompt them to turn and rend him.

He had no suspicion of any such possibility, and sailed ahead in an airy way, treating freely, and carrying out to the best of his ability the orders which he received from Mrs. Frias.

There was one man in the establishment to whom this sort of thing was extremely distasteful—in fact, he was bitterly opposed to it—and that man was Frank Foss.

The faro-dealer had been Del Castro's right-hand man since the opening of the Empire, and he had naturally expected that the control of the establishment would devolve upon him in the absence of his chief.

Besides his personal disappointment, it appeared to him to be the worst kind of disloyalty to the absent one, of whose objections to Coursell he was well aware, that the young swell should so suddenly be made so much of in and about the saloon.

Foss was determined to put a stop to this usurpation, and he believed that he could accomplish his purpose without appearing personally in the matter.

To tell the truth, he was inclined to be afraid of the "Witch of Shasta," and he was not the only one who held her in awe.

It was easy for him, however, to scatter hints and insinuations among the roughs and rustlers, and to quietly persuade them that it would be one of the best jokes of the season to "take a rise" out of the dudish tenderfoot who was airing his freshness so conspicuously in the Empire Saloon.

The time chosen for this exhibition of playfulness was during the absence of Mrs. Frias, who had gone on an errand of comfort and consolation to Manuel del Castro.

Several tough citizens who had been freely accepting the drinks freely offered by Eugene Coursell, until they had stimulated themselves into a condition of inebriated excitement, began to hustle the young man about, crowding and pushing and tripping him, in a species of horse play which may have been funny to them, but was decidedly unpleasant to him.

He looked about for Frank Foss; but the faro-dealer was out of the way, and the bar-keepers only smiled as if they were enjoying the fun.

Eugene did the best thing that he could do under the circumstances, inviting the crowd to the bar to drink at his expense, and the invitation was accepted with alacrity; but it did not put an end to the amusement of the party.

The hustling began again, more roughly than before, and more evidently with a vicious intention.

After the young man's hat had been knocked off and kicked out of shape, the playful performance assumed a more serious and more dangerous phase.

"Make a spread eagle of him!" shouted one, and the suggestion was unanimously adopted.

Two of the roughs seized young Coursell and braced him up against the wall of the saloon, extending his arms at right angles to his body, and securing him in that position by driving nails into the wall through the sleeves of his coat and the legs of his trousers.

Then the party moved back a little distance, and revolvers were drawn, and it became painfully evident to the victim that they intended to use him as a target.

He entreated his tormentors to let him alone, and offered to "set 'em up" to the entire resources of the Empire bar, but they were not to be persuaded out of their purpose.

"Tote fair, now, boys," ordered the leader of the merry band. "Shoot one at a time, and no scrougin'. It's the nearest miss that counts, and any durned fool who draws blood will have to buy the drinks fur the crowd."

Eugene again begged them to forego their brutal and dangerous diversion, but they were deaf to his entreaties.

The leader took the first shot, and the young man yelled as a bullet whizzed close by his head and buried itself in the wood of the wall.

It might have gone through into the next building, for all those tough citizens cared.

Another shot followed, and another yell of terror was extorted from the victim, while his tormentors fairly screamed with delight at the glorious fun they were having.

Rosa Frias was seated up-stairs, sewing, or pretending to sew, and Frank Foss was there with her, though no game was running then.

He was idly shuffling a pack of cards, and

dealing hands to imaginary players, when the attention of both was arrested by a commotion below, with shouts and loud laughter.

It was what the faro-dealer had been expecting; but it struck the young lady unpleasantly, and she frowned as she spoke:

"What is the matter down there, Mr. Foss?"

"Indeed I don't know. The menagerie will kick up its heels now and then, and I suppose the boys are only having a bit of their fun."

"It seems to me to be something out of the usual way, especially at this hour, and I wish you would go down and see what it is."

"Mr. Coursell is there, no doubt. He seems to be running the house, and I don't care to interfere with his management. If he wants the row stopped, I suppose he will stop it."

"I am afraid that they are worrying him."

"Worrying Coursell? Why should they bother themselves about him? What makes you think that they are worrying him?"

"I am sure that I heard his voice," insisted Rosa.

"He has plenty of lip, for that matter."

"But his voice sounded as if he might be in pain or in trouble, and he promised to come back right away. I am sure that he would have been up here before now if he had not been detained. I wish you would go and look after him."

"Mr. Coursell is quite at home here," coldly answered Foss, "and he ought to be able to look after himself."

Suddenly a shot was fired, and in the yell that followed it there was no mistaking the voice of Eugene Coursell.

"They are murdering him!" shrieked Rosa, and she darted to the door and ran down the stairway, followed more slowly and deliberately by the faro-dealer.

She reached the bar-room just as a third shot was fired, which grazed the ear of the victim and brought blood.

"That's drinks on Jeff!" shouted the mob, who were quick to see that the target had been touched.

A sudden hush came over them as Rosa darted down the stairway and halted in front of the unfortunate Eugene.

She faced them with burning cheeks and flashing eyes, and every word she uttered cut like a whip-lash.

"You mean brutes! You miserable, cowardly coyotes! This is a brave deed that you are doing here—the whole crowd of you, with shooters enough for a cavalry company, piling in on one unarmed man and trying to torment the life out of him. A friend of yours, too—a man whose treats you have taken, and whose money has been as free as air among you. You are worse than Digger Indians. If there was decency enough in the batch of you to fill my thimble, you would be so ashamed of yourselves that you would go out of here and never show your faces among white people again. Get away! You make me sick."

The tough citizens may have made to themselves the excuse that they could not fight a woman with weapons or words; but the real fact was that they felt the truth of the indictment, and that her words hurt them worse than blows or bullets.

All fell back at once, and one by one they sneaked away, even going so far as to leave the saloon, so that they might get out of range of the hot shot of her eloquence.

She picked up a hatchet which the roughs had used, knocked out the nails that had fastened Eugene to the wall, and requested him to step up-stairs.

"I leave you in charge here, Mr. Foss," she said, turning to the faro-dealer, "and if anything of this kind occurs here again, Mrs. Frias will hold you personally responsible."

"I will look after things," he answered; "but please don't play off any such threats on me."

CHAPTER XXXIV. A DEADLY DUEL.

MRS. FRIAS did not fail to visit Manuel del Castro and carry him comfort and consolation as often as she could do so without attracting attention and raising suspicions of her purpose.

In this respect she considered herself a model of faithfulness, as she might easily have neglected him or even betrayed him; but the truth was that she wanted to keep him quiet and induce him to go far from Glengartney.

In this she had a task that was too difficult for

The Spaniard chafed and grumbled under his enforced seclusion, but was resolutely opposed to leaving the neighborhood of Glengartney.

"I am tired of this sort of thing," he said to her. "If the trouble that you are always talking about does not blow over pretty soon, I will go into Glengartney and defy them all."

"You ought to be thankful that you are alive and that nobody has found you here. You had better take my advice and get out of the reach of danger. Above all, Manuel, you must not be rash and impatient."

"I have to be. How can I help it? No, I don't mean to get out of the reach of Glengartney. I am afraid that you are playing some game against me there."

"What game could I play, if I wanted to play any game against you?"

"The game of marrying Rosa to that young scapegrace from New York, because he is rich."

"That is too absurd, Manuel. How often must I tell you that there is nothing in that?"

"I wish you could prove it to me. I know nothing of what is going on there. Suppose you send Frank Foss out to me."

"Do you think that would be safe? For my part, I should be afraid to trust that man."

"Send Rosa, then."

"Rosa does not know the way. But I will do everything I can do to please you. I will either send Rosa or bring her."

The widow neither sent Rosa nor brought her to the impatient fugitive, and just then Rosa had an absorbing occupation that employed all her spare time.

This was nothing less than the corralling of that amiable but frisky colt, Eugene Coursell.

Though both of them really believed that it would be easy for a wealthy parent to forgive an only son, Eugene had such a wholesome fear of his father that he had not yet come to the point of marrying the girl he loved.

So the courtship went on, and in the pleasant weather Rosa was tempted to take long walks with her swain, which served to keep him away from liquor for a while, as well as to give him chances to declare himself.

One of these walks took them down the old stage road, and it was near sunset when they halted just at the spot where the eventful stage-robbery had occurred.

"I had no idea that it was so late," exclaimed Rosa. "Come, Eugene, we must turn right around and go back, and we must hurry, too."

"Wait a bit, Rosa," begged the young man. "Stop here just a moment. I've got something very particular to say to you. I have been trying to say it for a long time, and now I must get it off my mind."

"What can it be?" she innocently inquired, though she knew well enough what it was.

"Rosa, dear, you know how I love you. I have loved you so long and so hard. I never loved any girl but you, and I never will. Don't you think you can love me a little?"

"Perhaps I do," she meekly replied.

"Oh, Rosa, will you marry me? Will you be my wife?"

"Are you sure, Eugene, that it is you who is talking, and not whisky?"

"Whisky? I never drink whisky."

"Champagne, then?"

"It isn't champagne, either. I know what I am saying, and I mean what I say. I would have asked you before now, but have been afraid that my father would never consent."

"Have you any reason, now, to believe that he will?"

"Well, I hope he will."

"I have not the least bit of doubt, Eugene, that when we are married he will forgive you and do the fair thing by us."

"I believe he will, too."

"Then, Eugene, if you really want me for your wife, I will marry you to-morrow."

"Not much, young lady! I have something to say about that."

In spite of the harsh and unnatural tones of this speaker, Rosa recognized the voice of Manuel del Castro and she started, screamed, and turned pale with terror.

His appearance, as well as his tone, was calculated to frighten her, as he was nothing like the neat, trim, and well-dressed man she had known, his unshaven face, with his soiled and disordered apparel, giving him the look of a tramp or a wild man of the woods.

He was evidently in a furious rage, and his glaring eyes and haggard countenance were of themselves terrifying.

Eugene Coursell stood there as if he was stupefied by amazement and fear, being for the moment incapable of any action.

"So this is the game that has been played against me," roared the Spaniard. "I have dropped on it now, and I mean to stop it short off. You needn't run, Rosa. I am not going to hurt you. This sneaking son of a soap-box is my meat."

Eugene Coursell, perceiving his peril, turned to take refuge in flight; but his enemy was too quick for him, and caught him by the coat collar with a grasp that could not be shaken off.

"Now, young man," said the Spaniard as he drew a bowie-knife from behind his hip, "if there is anything in the shape of a prayer that you want to say, you had better say it right away."

"Let me go!" was the only prayer Eugene could think of.

"I will let you go to glory, if there is any room for such scalawags there. I swore that if I ever caught you at these tricks I would kill you where I found you, and that is what I mean to do."

"Not this time!"

A stalwart man, no longer young, but strong and active, had suddenly appeared on the scene, unnoticed by the leading actors, and he made his presence felt at once.

As this man spoke, he seized Del Castro, and gave him a jerk that sent him staggering back-

ward with Eugene, at the same time causing him to release his grip of his victim.

The Spaniard turned as soon as he had regained his footing, faced his antagonist, and recognized Tom Heston!

In his appearance Heston was a gentleman as compared with his adversary, and there was nothing peculiar about him but his eyes, which glared like those of an insane person.

"Is it you, then?" screamed Del Castro, who was wild with rage at this interruption.

"It is, you cowardly assassin, and I am glad I have found you. You thought you had murdered me in New York; but you missed your mark that time."

"I won't miss it this time."

Whatever the Spaniard was, he was no coward, and he raised his knife and dashed at the man before him.

If Tom Heston had a pistol, he did not attempt to use it, but drew a similar knife, and was equally ready for the onset.

It was at once evident that the duel was to be a murderous one and to the death, and it was more like a combat of wild beasts than an encounter of civilized men.

Eugene Coursell and Rosa Frias, paralyzed or fascinated by the terrible sight, made no effort to get away, but gazed with staring eyes and blanched faces at the bloody fight.

As the combatants rushed together they cut and slashed and stabbed, with scarcely an attempt at parrying, and as if anxious to end the murderous affair, they closed in, and each stabbed without any apparent effort on the part of the other to avoid the blow.

Side by side they dropped upon the ground, Heston dead before he touched the earth, and Del Castro gasping his last at his side.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE WIDOW'S MIGHT.

THE fatal close of this awful combat was witnessed by two horsemen, who rode swiftly to the scene, greatly to the relief of the two appalled spectators there.

The horsemen were Eric Kempton and George Warner, and they were in search of Tom Heston, whose erratic behavior had lately been a cause of great uneasiness to the household at Crow Nest.

They found him dead, and Eugene Coursell explained to them the circumstances that had led to the duel.

"They both looked, and acted, and fought like crazy men," said he.

The affair did have the appearance of a conflict between lunatics, and there was nothing more to be said about it.

"It is a great pity," observed Warner. "If we had got here five minutes sooner we might have stopped this and saved the life of our friend."

"But we did not get here in time," answered Eric, "and he is dead, and we can do nothing but care for the body. Suppose you stay here, Warner, while I go to the house to break the news to the people there and get a team to carry him home."

"And Miss Frias and I will hurry on to Glengartney," said Coursell, "and will send for the body of the other man."

This arrangement left George Warner alone with the dead; but he did not mind that, and Eugene and Rose hurried off, glad to get away from that horrible scene, while Eric Kempton rode at his best speed to Crow Nest.

The news of the death of the two men was differently received by different people in different quarters.

From the sudden taking off of Manuel del Castro Mrs. Frias experienced a feeling of relief, if not of absolute joy, which she was not unwilling to express freely to Rosa, though she was sufficiently decorous in the presence of other people.

It could not have happened at a better time, as she had no further use for him, and he would surely have been a great obstruction to the grand plan of catching such a prize as Eugene Coursell.

Rose was also glad to be freed from her fear of the Spaniard, and the heir of the Excelsior Soap rejoiced that he would never again have Del Castro's grip on his collar.

There was no mourning for him in Glengartney, where the few friends he had made had been turned against him by the murder of Charley Wingfield, and the generally expressed opinion was that it was a great pity that a good man should have died in killing him; for Tom Heston was counted a good man, and even the "Witch of Shasta" was not then disposed to speak evil of him.

The news of his death was received at Crow Nest with more grief than surprise.

Mrs. Heston and Lucy had accustomed themselves to the thought that his existence was precarious, and lately his conduct had been so peculiar that for several days they had not expected him to come home alive.

Still the fact of his sudden death, and especially the terrible manner in which death came to him, gave them a shock from which they did not easily recover.

Nobody could be kinder than the Kemptons

were, and they persuaded George Warner to make his home for a while at Crow Nest, where he was useful in consoling Lucy and advising her mother.

It was decided that Tom Heston should be buried in the State where so much of his life had been spent, and a near day was set for the funeral at Crow Nest.

The ceremonies were not largely attended, though the family would not have cared to see any more people there.

Tom Heston had not made many acquaintances in the neighborhood; but a sufficient number of Eric Kempton's friends came to the funeral, and Andrew Gartney was of course there.

Thus everything went on decently and in order, or would have done so, had it not been for an unpleasant episode for which Mrs. Frias was responsible, and for which she had duly prepared herself.

The body of Tom Heston lay in the most elegant coffin that could be procured in that locality, and the face was uncovered, so that all who chose to do so could look at him before he was laid to rest.

The face was calm and peaceful, and all who had been acquainted with the dead man wondered at its natural and lifelike appearance.

Indeed, as Eric Kempton said, he seemed to be several years younger than he had lately looked.

The coffin was in the large front room of Kempton's house, and the windows were all open to let in the balmy air.

Andrew Gartney, seated alone at an end of the veranda, meditating perhaps on the uncertainty of life, saw two late comers, a man and a woman, dismount a little distance from the house.

It may be as well to speak of them as a gentleman and a lady, as she was quite too richly dressed, considering that she had come on horseback, and he was attired in gentlemanly style.

The old Scotchman wondered at first who these late arrivals could be; but, when he had got his spectacles focused on them he wondered no longer.

"It is the Witch of Shasta," he muttered, "and she means mischief."

He noticed, also, that her companion was Amos Wintle, the young clerk who had been the only occupant with George Winck in the stage at the time of the robbery, and who had been shipped to San Francisco by George Warner.

Yes, it was Amos Wintle, and of course he could be there for no good, though he would not willingly have harmed anybody, and would have been specially unwilling to harm the kind friend who sent him southward.

He had been sent back to Glengartney in charge of some important papers that were to be executed by George Warner, and Mrs. Frias, who had learned of his connection with the stage robbery, had pounced upon him as soon as he arrived, and had borne him off in triumph to Crow Nest, where he was told that he would find Mr. Warner.

As he had been told nothing of the real purpose for which he was sent away, and knew nothing of any connection between George Warner and the stage robbery, the part that Mrs. Frias meant him to play was also hidden from him.

Andrew Gartney rose to step forward and stop them; but the widow was too quick for him, and she passed unmolested with her companion into the room where the coffin lay.

Mrs. Frias led the young man at once to the coffin, and pointed at the face of the dead Tom Heston.

"Look at that face," said she, "and tell me if it is the same man who robbed the stage."

It was evident from his countenance that he recognized the man in the coffin.

"It is the same face," he answered, "and it must be the same man."

George Warner, who had just stepped in from the rear, saw those two standing there, and he frowned darkly and hastened forward as the meaning of the scene flashed upon him; but he was not quick enough to arrest the young man's answer.

"Are you sure?" demanded Mrs. Frias.

"Don't answer any such questions," sharply broke in Warner. "There is nothing that we want to know."

"Please let him speak," urged Lucy, who had risen from her seat and was listening with breathless eagerness.

Mrs. Frias produced a small piece of crape, which she laid lightly over the dead man's forehead and eyes.

"Are you sure," she repeated, "that this is the same man who robbed the stage?"

"Yes, I am sure," answered the bewildered Wintle. "I could never forget that face."

"What does this mean?" feebly inquired Mrs. Heston, who had been staring at the scene in astonishment.

"It means," forcibly replied the widow, "that I have told you the straight truth; that Tom Heston, there, is the man who robbed that stage near Glengartney, and who got away with the

plunder while my husband was left to die for his crime. That is what it means, and now I have proved it, and nobody can deny it."

That was what it meant, and when Mrs. Heston realized the meaning she fell forward in a faint.

"As you have done all the harm you could do, madam," said George Warner as he advanced toward Mrs. Frias, "I suppose you are willing to go away from here now."

She was not willing to go; but there was that in the young man's face which spoke of the possibility of a forcible ejection, and she sailed out of the house serenely.

Amos Wintle seemed uncertain as to whether he ought to follow her; but Warner decided the question for him by detaining him.

"You have put your foot in it, my friend," said he, "though I suppose that your part of the harm was innocently done. I wish you would remain here, as I have something to say to you."

So the widow rode away alone, well satisfied with her work.

She could not say that she had gained anything; but she had at least gratified her spite.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

RESTITUTION.

So Tom Heston was buried; but there was left behind him a painful memory, if not a bitter one.

"The evil that men do lives after them," though all the good is not always "interred with their bones."

During the remainder of the funeral ceremonies Lucy could not speak to George Warner concerning the sore subject which had been so unpleasantly revived, and at their close he rode away from Glengartney, pleading necessities of business as an excuse for leaving Crow Nest.

Thereafter he stayed away from there for quite a while, perhaps because he did not wish to intrude upon the grief of his friends, perhaps because he did not care to be questioned upon that sore subject.

Of course this state of affairs could not last long, and one day the young man informed Andrew Gartney that he must positively go to Crow Nest, as Lucy Heston was anxious to see him.

"If I am any judge of that sort of thing, my boy," replied the Scotchman, "she wants you all the time."

"I hope so; but she needs me particularly just now, as there are matters of importance to be settled."

Hardly had he made this statement, when there came a messenger from Crow Nest, to inform him that Mrs. Heston wished to consult with him concerning affairs of business.

When he got there he discovered, as he had expected would be the case, that it was Lucy who was anxious to see him, and the subject concerning which she wanted to consult him, was the revelation made by Mrs. Frias and its proof.

"I suppose, then, that it is true," said she, "and that the fear of its becoming known and being proved to be true, was what worried my father out of his mind, and drove him to his death."

Warner was silent, as there was no denying what she said, or arguing it away.

"You say nothing, George. Is that because you admit the truth of this thing? I suppose you must, as there seems to be no hope of denying it. But you must know more about it than I do, and your judgment is much better than mine. I have always trusted you implicitly. Tell me plainly, is this thing true?"

"I have no doubt of it, Lucy. Indeed, I was sure of it before we left New York. I have tried to keep the truth from coming out, and I sent away that young man, the only person who could prove it; but he returned unexpectedly, and that woman got hold of him."

"That was very kind of you, George. It was kind to mother and me, and it was kind to him. But the truth has come out in spite of you. And so I am the daughter of a highway robber."

"You are the daughter of a man who once committed a robbery; but that was the only one, I believe."

"But that one robbery was the foundation of his fortune, and to it mother and I owe all that we have."

"I think you are putting the case much too strongly," demurred Warner.

"I am afraid that I do not miss the truth very widely. It is bad enough in any shape. What has been done cannot be undone; but it is still possible to make reparation."

"What do you mean, Lucy?"

I mean that we must find the man from whom that property was taken, and restore it to him, or its value, as far as we can."

"Perhaps he is dead," suggested George.

"If so, he must have left children, or heirs of some kind. That is what I want to know, and you must find it out for me, George."

"I will do my best, and I have no doubt that I will succeed. I have already been making some investigations, and now that I have learned what you want I will go into the matter

more thoroughly. It may be something of a sacrifice for you and your mother."

"I will gladly give up all we have if I can get the burden off my mind in that way."

"I don't think it will cost you as much as that. Anyhow, I will be a rich man when my uncle's estate is settled up, and when we are married you will be in no danger of starving. It is my opinion, Lucy, from what I have learned so far, that I will find the heirs of the man in New York. So we will all get through our business here as soon as we can, and go back to New York."

The business which had brought George Warner to California, as well as that which concerned Mrs. Heston and Lucy since the death of their husband and father, could not be settled up very quickly; but finally everything was completed, as far as their presence was required, and the three took leave of their friends in and about Glengartney, and returned to the East.

In the mean time, Eugene Coursell's wooing, so rudely interrupted by Manuel del Castro, had been brought to a termination by marriage.

He eloped from Glengartney with Rosa, and married her in Omaha, from which point he sent back a dispatch to his father, informing him of the marriage, and seeking his forgiveness.

Coursell senior, highly indignant, closed up his business in Glengartney immediately, and hastened to New York.

There he found Eugene and his bride comfortably established in rooms, awaiting his decision, and there was apparent such a great change for the better in the young man, that the father began to believe that his marriage would be the making of him.

It may be stated here that this belief was justified by the result, as Rosa's restraining influence steadied her husband so thoroughly that he was taken into the Excelsior Soap business, where his conduct made his father justly proud of him.

Mrs. Frias remained in Glengartney, where she laid claim to the ownership of the Empire Saloon, averring that the business had been started with her money, and her success in establishing that claim was due to public sympathy rather than to the strict methods of the law.

Shortly after George Warner and the Hestons had returned to New York, Lucy urged the young man to hasten his search for the man who was robbed, or for his heirs, so that she and her mother might make restitution to him or them.

"I have been attending to that matter," answered George, "and have learned that the man is dead; but he has left an heir, and there is only one, so far as I have been able to discover."

"Who is the heir?"

"I will tell you when we are married, and will settle the business for you then, when I have the management of your affairs. I assure you that it shall be settled to your satisfaction."

Lucy repeated this conversation to her mother, and congratulated her upon the prospect of soon being able to make reparation for the wrong done by their husband and father; but Mrs. Heston was not at all exhilarated by the idea of losing the property upon which she had set her heart.

"It will be very hard, my dear," said she, "to give up all we have and go back to poverty."

"It will not take all we have, mother, and it will not drive us back to poverty. George says so, and he has plenty of his own besides. Oh, it will be all right when George and I are married."

And so they were married, and the honeymoon had hardly begun when Lucy again pressed her husband to tell her the name of the heir of the man who was robbed, and to settle up the business of restitution.

"It is already settled," he answered. "The man has been paid, and he is satisfied."

"How has it been paid? Not out of your pocket, I hope. Mother and I have signed no checks, and nobody has called on us for any money."

"That was not necessary, as it happened. The fact is, Lucy, that the man in the stage-coach who lost the property was my uncle, George Winck. I am his only heir, and in marrying me you have extinguished the claim. I don't see how we could straighten up the thing any straighter."

So that matter was settled, and George Warner was free to develop his inventions, which he succeeded in doing, to his entire satisfaction and great profit.

THE END.

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